

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE BURNING SWORD





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
BURNING SWORD**

Uncle Titus has every reason to be happy. He is invited to an opening of a will! But instead of the millions of dollars he hopes for, he inherits a worthless red crystal, which he is to pass on to a person named Beany. But who is Beany? The Three Investigators takes on the case. An anonymous caller leads them on the trail of a dangerous secret cult. And suddenly, Jupiter, Pete and Bob find themselves in a breathtaking adventure involving obsession, madness and superstition.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Burning Sword

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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by

André Marx

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Aiga Rasch

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Contents

- 1. A Mysterious Inheritance**
- 2. Who's Beany?**
- 3. Who's Billy?**
- 4. Stolen Information**
- 5. An Old Trick**
- 6. Finally a Trace**
- 7. The Opaque Mr Whitehead**
- 8. Pete's Solo Effort**
- 9. The Burning Sword**
- 10. Mr Whitehead Reveals**
- 11. Bob's Findings**
- 12. A Clear Warning**
- 13. The Inconsiderate Mr Whitehead**
- 14. Trapped!**
- 15. The Valley of Death**
- 16. The Truth Comes to Light**
- 17. When Day and Night Unite**
- 18. The Beautiful Things in Life**

1. A Mysterious Inheritance

“Is Uncle Titus back yet?” asked Jupiter as he entered the kitchen and chucked his backpack into a corner.

Aunt Mathilda, who was about to prepare lunch, gave him a reproachful look. “Would you please not just throw your things all over the place, but take them to where they belong—in your room?” she admonished him.

“All right,” Jupiter relented, since he didn’t want to get involved in a petty argument with his aunt. Most of the time he got the short end of the stick. He picked up the backpack and quickly went into his room to throw it into a corner again. When he returned, Aunt Mathilda looked at him expectantly.

“How was school?” she wanted to know.

“As always,” Jupiter replied curtly. “So he hasn’t come back yet?”

“As you can see,” Aunt Mathilda replied and returned to her steaming cooking pots.

“Aren’t you curious?” Jupiter asked.

“About what?”

“Don’t pretend. Of course you’re curious, you just don’t want to admit it.”

“Curious about the old junk Titus is about to tow here? I think any anticipation is inappropriate.”

“So you really think Uncle Titus inherited nothing but worthless junk?” Jupiter asked.

“What else? Do you think he’ll be back as a millionaire any minute now?” she asked sarcastically. “What else would an old acquaintance of Titus bequeath to him but the stuff he had hoarded in his attic and cellar, with which no one but Titus would want?”

Uncle Titus had received a letter from a notary a week ago informing him that an old acquaintance from Titus’s time as a petrol station attendant had died. They hadn’t seen each other in decades. It was all the more surprising that the deceased had designated Uncle Titus as one of his heirs. Since then Jupiter feverishly awaited the day of the execution of the will, as he was keenly interested in what was behind it. His aunt Mathilda seemed to be convinced that the alleged benefactor only wanted to leave her husband his old furniture.

After all, Titus Jones was a well-known junk dealer and with his Jones Salvage Yard, as it is named, he attracted people from all over the area.

That morning the appointment had been with the notary and Jupiter, who lived with his uncle and aunt, would have loved to attend. Compulsory education had unfortunately prevented him from doing so.

He sat down at the kitchen table and drummed restlessly with his fingers on the table top. “Maybe there’s more to it than that,” he murmured.

But Aunt Mathilda only laughed. “You’re smelling another mystery, aren’t you? Is there anything in your everyday life that leaves your criminal zeal completely cold?” With this she alluded to the detective company that her nephew and his two friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, had been running very successfully for several years. They had already solved many exciting cases.

“Criminological zeal,” Jupiter corrected her. “Surely there is. But an unexpected inheritance under such strange circumstances is not exactly common, you must admit.”

"I don't find anything weird about an old friend remembering Titus and bequeathing him a few things for his junk trade."

"You still don't know if it's really junk," Jupe said, pushing himself out of his chair to look out of the kitchen window. He was looking out for Uncle Titus's old pick-up truck. But there was still no trace of him and Jupe let himself fall back on the chair disappointed.

A short while later, Aunt Mathilda suggested to start eating without Uncle Titus when they heard the truck roll into the salvage yard. "There he is," Jupiter cried, but forced himself to remain seated, not wanting to admit in front of Aunt Mathilda how curious he really was. So he waited patiently until his uncle entered the house and the kitchen. Titus Jones was a small, wiry man with a huge black moustache of which he was very proud of. His good nature prevented Jupiter from reading his face how the morning had gone. But he immediately noticed a small box his uncle was carrying under his arm.

"Here I am again," said Titus Jones in a good mood. "And I'm hungry." He sat down at the table and laid the box on the chair next to him. Aunt Mathilda put the food on.

"Tomorrow it's your turn to cook," she said. "I only represented you here today." She smiled sarcastically at her husband.

Jupiter could not hold on anymore. "What was the will about?" he wanted to know. "What did the notary say? Have you actually inherited anything?"

Uncle Titus nodded and dipped his spoon into the soup.

"And what was it? Old furniture, as Aunt Mathilda suspected?" Jupe showed his curiosity.

Titus shook his head just as thoughtfully and slurped the soup, which was still a little too hot. "No money either," he added, "if that's your next question." He grinned because he knew exactly how curious his nephew was.

Jupiter decided to go along with the game. "Aha," he said, emphatically calm and then spooned his soup in silence as well.

Uncle Titus grinned and Aunt Mathilda kept casting short glances over to the two as if she hoped that soon one of them would begin to speak. But no one said a word. Not even when she cleared away the soup plates and put the vegetable casserole on the table. Both Uncle Titus and Jupiter avoided looking at each other.

When Aunt Mathilda took the dessert out of the fridge, she couldn't take it anymore. "Come on, Titus Jones, tell us what happened," she told him.

"I'd love to. I was just waiting for someone to ask me," he said and grinned.

"I thought you weren't curious," Jupe snapped at his aunt.

She waved off. "Stop this nonsense. I want to know right now what you inherited."

"All right." Uncle Titus sat back in satisfaction. "So I went to the notary. There were three other people there besides me—the mayor of Rocky Beach and a man and a woman about my age. The three were at least as surprised as I was to have been invited to the execution of the will.

"The woman and the man were probably old acquaintances but had not seen or heard from Billy Ford for years. The mayor had never met him personally. Relatives were not mentioned at all, or perhaps he didn't have any. He bequeathed all his possessions, first and foremost his house and his money, to the town of Rocky Beach, which was why the mayor was there for. He wanted his house to be converted into a student residence. He himself taught as a professor at the university, as I learned. His modest fortune was to be used for reconstruction work.

"We waited anxiously to see what the notary had for us. He said that Billy Ford had left each of us a box, and it was his will that we only open these boxes when we got home. He

handed us the items. The woman got a long, narrow box, the other man got a box about the size of a shoe box, and I got this.” He took out the small square box and placed it in front of him on the table. “Then we had to sign some papers and go.”

Jupiter and Aunt Mathilda stared spellbound at the wooden box. “Of course, you’ve already opened that thing,” presumed Aunt Mathilda.

Uncle Titus smiled embarrassedly. “I must confess that I did. But only after I left the notary’s office.”

“And?” asked Jupiter, who couldn’t stand being tortured, even though he was often enough a mystery-monger himself.

“Do you want to see it?” Uncle Titus asked.

“Don’t ask so hypocritically,” his wife replied. “Of course we want to see it. And if you don’t open that box right now, I’ll never cook for you again.”

“All right. But don’t be too disappointed.” He looked at the two again, then pulled the box towards him, turned it around and opened the lid so that Jupiter and Aunt Mathilda could see the contents.

In the sunlight streaming through the kitchen window, a red gemstone about the size of a child’s fist sparkled at them.

2. Who's Beany?

"Oh, my goodness," Aunt Mathilda breathed, then put her hand in front of her mouth as if she regretted her words.

Jupiter stared fixedly at the shining stone, but then he thought of his uncle's calmness and he had first doubts about the value of the gemstone. "What is it, Uncle Titus?" he wanted to know.

He smiled awkwardly. "It's definitely not a reason for euphoria. You can take your hand off your mouth, Mathilda. We're not in possession of the world's largest diamond or anything. There was a letter in the box in which Billy Ford explained to me that firstly, the stone was only made of worthless glass and secondly, it was not even for me."

"Just glass?" Aunt Mathilda said disappointed.

"Not for you?" asked Jupiter in surprise. "But you're the heir."

Uncle Titus took an envelope out of his shirt pocket and handed it to his nephew. "Read it yourself!" Jupiter opened the envelope and took out a note.

It was written in neat handwriting:

My dear Titus,

I'm sure you're surprised to hear from me under such unusual circumstances. We lost touch of each other decades ago, and now I cannot even give a sign of life from myself, because I am already dead.

And I have to disappoint you again: The impressive red stone is unfortunately nothing more than glass and therefore as good as worthless. The third disappointment is that you can't keep it. Please pass it on to Beany, he can do more with it. You will surely ask yourself what all this is about and why, of all people, I have chosen you to carry out one last task for me after my death. The answer is very simple: All the people who know me better will have to do some mourning for a while and therefore cannot take care of the stone, along with Beany. You're probably best suited for this because you don't care much about my death.

In return for your trouble, a few dollars is enclosed in this letter.

Say hello to Beany for me.

Billy Ford

"Very direct," Jupiter remarked after reading the letter and giving it to Aunt Mathilda. "He'll save himself the trouble of making solemn speeches and get straight to the point. A little unusual. But well, if you really haven't seen each other for so long, maybe it's understandable."

"We weren't even friends," Uncle Titus said. "He was just an acquaintance who worked with me at the petrol station for a while. That was before I met your aunt."

"How much money was in the envelope?" Jupiter wanted to know.

“That’s the good news of the day,” Uncle Titus replied, and the tips of his moustache moved up as he grinned. “Billy Ford left me a hundred dollars, after all.” He pulled out his wallet, took out a \$100 bill and waved it around in the air.

“One hundred dollars?” Aunt Mathilda murmured. “A pathetic heir. All he wanted to do was to make sure you gave this Beany the stone. Who is Beany anyway?”

“That’s the strangest thing about it,” Uncle Titus said and his smile disappeared. “I don’t know any Beany at all.”

“Are you telling me that you don’t even know who the stone is for?” Jupiter was puzzled.

“Exactly. I was worried about that on the way back from the notary. I’ve been wondering who Billy meant. But as much as I think about it, I don’t get it. I don’t know anybody named Beany, I’m sure.”

“Strange,” Jupiter thought. “Then why would Billy write you this message?”

“Maybe he mistook me for someone else. We haven’t seen each other in over twenty years. And who knows when he wrote his will. He was said to be seriously ill, I heard. Perhaps he was already mentally confused when he wrote this letter.”

“And what are you going to do now?” asked Aunt Mathilda.

Uncle Titus blew his cheeks and then let the air out noisily. “No idea, I don’t know. Honestly, I have little desire and time to take care of the matter. I’d like to fulfil Billy’s last wish, but I’m not particularly keen on wasting my time looking for a person I don’t even know. Wouldn’t that be something for you detectives, Jupe? Maybe you could track down this Beany guy.”

Jupiter made a face. “So without any clues, this is going to be difficult.”

“Well, maybe you can think of something. There’s no hurry.” Aunt Mathilda had taken the stone out of the box and looked at it with interest, as if looking for proof that it was a real gemstone. “It’s beautiful,” she thought, “but on the other hand it’s also kitschy, considering it’s practically worthless.” She then passed the stone to Jupe.

The First Investigator held the stone against the light and the artfully polished facets sparkled blood-red. “It can’t be worthless. Otherwise there would be no sense in it being individually bequeathed to a particular person. Perhaps the stone is not of a particular value because of its material, but because of its workmanship. There’s a small air pocket in the middle. Maybe this is an artisan masterpiece.”

At that moment, two bicycle bells rang outside.

Jupiter put the stone back in the box and looked out the kitchen window. He spotted his two friends who had just come to the salvage yard. “There’s Pete and Bob. I’ll go and see them.” He left the house and went across the salvage yard to the discarded home trailer they used as the office for their detective business. Headquarters, as they called the trailer, had been equipped over time with a telephone, fax machine and all kinds of technical equipment.

“Hello, Jupe,” Pete greeted the First Investigator. “We want to go swimming. Are you coming with us?”

“Pete urgently needs to balance his day with sport,” Bob added, grinning at the tall, well-trained boy. “He got his maths paper back today.”

“And?” Jupe turned to the Second Investigator.

Pete made a bad face. “Don’t ask. I have to go for a swim to get over it.”

Jupe shook his head. “I’ll never understand that,” he sighed.

“Of course not. If you need to balance your day with school, you’d better read the latest issue of *Current Science* or something like that—instead of doing sports,” blasphemed Pete. “Well, you can see that, too.” He took a disapproving look at Jupe’s belly.

“What happened to this inheritance thing for your uncle Titus,” Bob distracted because he wanted to prevent one of the many small arguments that his two friends so often fought over. “Wasn’t the execution of the will today?”

Jupiter nodded. “Some interesting things have happened,” he said.

“Are you rich now and moving to Malibu Beach soon?” Pete asked.

“Not quite. I’ll tell you the whole story at the pool.”

“That means you’re coming with us?” Pete wondered.

Jupiter grinned. “I hate to be told that one can infer my primary leisure activities from my apparent appearance.”

“He means he wants to prove that he doesn’t read *Current Science* all day long,” Bob translated for perplexed-looking Pete.

The swimming pool was not crowded as many people were drawn to the beach in this beautiful weather. Pete preferred the pool because he knew exactly how far and how fast he swam. For him as an athlete, that was at least as important as having fun. After he had completed his 1,000-metre workout, while Bob and Jupiter were just splashing around, they laid down on their bath towels. With wise foresight, Jupiter had plundered Aunt Mathilda’s refrigerator before they left. He knew exactly how hungry he always was after swimming. Now the three of them started to gobble down fruit, meatballs and fruit juice.

“Tell me,” Bob told the First Investigator with his mouth full. “What came out of this inheritance thing?”

Jupiter told them what Uncle Titus had encountered. “And now he’s wondering if there’s a mix-up,” he ended.

“He really can’t remember who Beany is?” Pete asked. “That seems to be a nickname. Maybe it’s someone he only knows by another name.”

“Possibly. By the way, Uncle Titus asked me to investigate the matter,” the First Investigator explained to his friends. “There’s no rush, we should only let him know if we think of anything.”

“Well, let’s see,” Bob murmured. “The story is a bit mysterious. It could be very exciting to find out what’s behind this inheritance and the stone.”

“I see detective zeal flashing in your eyes,” said Pete. “I hope that doesn’t mean I won’t be able to do anything else in the next few weeks, I won’t have time for Kelly and I won’t be able to go swimming because I have to be part of some investigation.”

“Wait and see,” Jupiter said. “I don’t expect that much from this.”

Bob was lucky because his first class was cancelled the next morning. As he sat at the breakfast table, he thought of Jupiter and Pete, who went to their classes and were certainly already sweating over their tasks. Then he corrected himself in thought: Pete would sweat while Jupiter was explaining to the teacher something he had read in the latest issue of *Current Science*.

Bob grabbed the newspaper, which he hardly ever read in the morning. He adhered exactly to a schedule that did not include newspaper reading: At twenty to eight the alarm clock rang and then Bob had exactly two minutes to wake up, four minutes to wash and dress, two and a half minutes to brush his teeth, six and a half minutes for breakfast, one minute to pack his bag and get the bike out of the garage, and four minutes to get to school. Since the first lesson was cancelled today, however, he still had time to take a look at the newspaper.

His father had once worked at *Rocky Beach Today* before he went to the much larger *Los Angeles Times*, so it was a family thing for Bob to deal with the local press.

He was interested in reading the article about the upcoming solar eclipse in a week's time. All of California was in a flurry of excitement because of the natural spectacle that would only be seen in this part of the world. It was an extremely rare astronomical event that occurred only once every few decades or even centuries in certain regions. California was expecting thousands of tourists from elsewhere to come here to witness the eclipse.

After that Bob opened the local part of the newspaper, scanned the headlines and got stuck at one report: 'Secrets Surrounding Prof. Bill Ford'. Bob quickly read the article, then folded the newspaper together, gulped down his cocoa and ran outside. He wanted to catch Jupe and Pete during the first break.

3. Who's Billy?

"Hey, Bob, you're so early? I thought you're going straight to the second class today, which doesn't start for fifteen minutes," Pete shouted amusedly at his friend and looked demonstratively at his watch.

"Right," Bob replied out of breath as he locked his bike and went to the school yard where Jupiter and Pete waited for the break to end. "But I have to show you what I just found in the papers." He took the folded sheet out of his backpack and held out the article to his friends. "Professor Bill Ford, that's the deceased person your uncle inherited from, isn't it, Jupe?"

The First Investigator nodded. "Billy Ford. Right, that's him. What kind of mystery is this about?"

"It has been discovered that the deceased is not Billy Ford at all. From the all paperwork that had to be done because of his death, it was revealed that Billy Ford was not his real name!" Bob explained.

"Does that mean that Billy Ford isn't even dead?" Pete asked.

"No. The dead man is Billy Ford and he was also a professor at the University of Los Angeles. But it seems he changed his identity more than thirty years ago. His former name was William Benson and he lived in Africa. Then he moved to California for unknown reasons and some time later he disappeared from the scene and reappeared as Bill Ford. But that's only been known since his death."

"Does this report say what he did in Africa?" Jupiter asked, while he scanned the article at the same time.

"It is not known," Bob replied curtly. "Do you think all this has something to do with the strange inheritance and the stone?"

"It's definitely unusual. We should take a closer look at the stone," Pete suggested. "And the box and the letter. Maybe we'll figure something out."

"Well, you already caught the fire," Bob told him. "Didn't you just express your concern about a new investigation yesterday?"

The school bell saved Pete an answer.

"We'll talk about it this afternoon," Jupiter said. "Three o'clock at Headquarters."

The Three Investigators then hurried to get into the school building.

Even in the relative darkness of the trailer, the red stone seemed to glow on its own. It was like there was a fire trapped inside it.

"Madness," Pete was astonished, who, together with Bob, stood leaning over the stone. "The light refracts in the thousand facets so strongly that the stone seems to glow... or burn. And that's really just glass?"

"At least that's what the letter says," Jupiter explained, pointing to the piece of paper next to them on the desk. "But you're right, we should have a jeweller check it out."

"Better not," Pete thought. "Later it turns out it's a valuable gemstone, and we get into a conflict of conscience over whether to keep the stone or not."

“Of course we won’t keep it,” Jupe said for sure. “After all, Uncle Titus asked us to find this Beany.”

“Just kidding,” Pete defended himself. “Sometimes you’re really slow on the uptake.”

“And Uncle Titus still doesn’t know who this Beany could be?” Bob asked. “Did he spend some time to try to remember?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “He said he tried. But he could barely remember Billy Ford. By the way, Uncle Titus knew nothing of his former identity.”

“I wonder how it’s all connected,” Pete thought. “Where should we start?”

“I don’t think we should forget our actual mission,” Bob said. “After all, we don’t want to solve the mystery about this Billy Ford alias William Benson, but to find the rightful owner of the stone. If Uncle Titus doesn’t know any Beany, we’ll just have to find out who he is.”

“About the other heirs,” Jupiter suggested. “Uncle Titus spoke of two other people who also got a box each. Maybe we’ll find out who Beany is through them.”

“Or maybe Beany’s among them,” Pete thought. “It could be some kind of joke where the heirs have to exchange heirlooms.”

Bob frowned doubtfully. “What kind of an idea is that?” he pondered. “What would be the point?”

“I don’t know. It was just a thought. But whatever it is, we still have a problem: How can we get to the heirs?” Pete asked. “Does Uncle Titus remember their names?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I already asked him. We must somehow try to locate them.”

“I wonder if they’re from Rocky Beach,” Bob wondered.

“I don’t know now,” said Jupiter. “But we could also check with the notary. He must know their names.”

“Would a notary give us such information? Doesn’t all of this fall under those data protection and privacy thing?” Pete asked.

“That’s what we’re gonna find out,” replied Jupe. “I suggest we go there right away and on the way, we find a jeweller and show him the stone. I’d like to know what he has to say.”

“Did you ask your uncle if we could just take the stone with us?” Pete wanted to know.

Jupiter laughed. “His interest in it is not particularly great. After all, he can’t sell the thing here at the salvage yard, and everything Uncle Titus can’t sell, he doesn’t really care.”

They left Headquarters, got on their bikes and cycled to the centre of Rocky Beach. There they went to see the only jeweller in town. As they entered the store, a brass bell rang and a small, slim man with nickel spectacles and a furrowed forehead looked up and looked suspiciously at them. A jeweller like in a picture book, Pete thought.

“Hello,” Jupiter said and put on his friendliest smile to wipe away the man’s doubts as quickly as possible. “We’d like to ask you a question. We have a stone here and my uncle says it’s made of glass, but we wonder if it’s really true.”

The jeweller didn’t say a word, but stretched out his hand demandingly. Jupiter looked at him in amazement, then he handed him the little wooden box. The man opened it with his bony fingers and pulled up his eyebrows in surprise before suspiciously lowering them again. He clamped a small magnifying glass to one of his glasses and took the stone out of the box to look at it from all sides.

“Amazing work,” he said.

“What is it?” Pete asked curiously.

The jeweller gave Pete a reproachful and turned back to the stone as if he had no intention of answering the question. But finally he said: “It is coloured lead crystal. Glass—in

the broadest sense.”

“Lead crystal consists of normal crystal glass and twenty-two percent lead,” Jupiter began. “It’s softer than normal glass, but you can grind it better and it shines much brighter.”

The jeweller looked at him inquisitively. “Remarkable,” he admitted to him. “Even more remarkable, however, is the workmanship of this piece. It’s handmade. The glass was mouth-blown, hence the small air pocket in the middle. And the stone was cut very artistically by hand, not by machine. It’s not cheap kitsch from a department store.”

“Then is the stone valuable?” Bob asked.

“Valuable? That’s a relative term. It’s certainly more valuable than department store kitsch, but it’s not worth a fortune,” the jeweller replied. “Do you want to sell it? I’d give you... say, fifty dollars for it.”

“No, thank you, we don’t want to sell it,” Jupiter replied. “Can you tell us any more about the stone?”

“Well, it seems a little old. The corners of the facets are partly splintered, in addition you can clearly see irregularities in the cut. This indicates that the stone was not machined with modern equipment, but with quite old-fashioned tools.”

“How old would you say it was?” Jupiter enquired.

The man pursed his lips. “Hard to say. A hundred years, maybe? But it can also be older or younger.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jupiter stretched out his hand demanding, as the jeweller had done before. Almost reluctantly the man gave him the stone back and Jupiter put it back in the box. “You’ve helped us a lot.” They left the shop ringing the brass bell again.

“Lead crystal,” Pete said as they stood on the street. “So not valuable. Too bad.”

“Still it’s interesting though, what the jeweller told us,” Jupiter said. “He seemed quite impressed with the craftsmanship.”

“Fine, but what’s the point?” Pete questioned.

“Nothing,” admitted the First Investigator. “And so we will now go to the notary to ask him about the other two heirs. But at least now we know something about this stone.”

They were also disappointed at the notary, as his office had already closed for the day. They decided they had to try again the next day. On the way back Bob said goodbye to them at the road. “I have a date with Elizabeth. I’ll see you tomorrow at school. So long!”

Pete also went home and so Jupiter cycled back to Headquarters on his own. There he sat down at the desk to work a little on the computer, but again and again the small wooden box next to the keyboard distracted him. Finally he gave in to temptation and opened it to look at the stone again. It was really beautiful. Jupiter considered that it was probably the extraordinary polish that gave it such radiance. What did Pete say? The stone seemed to glow... or burn. Without knowing exactly why, he was fascinated by the piece of glass.

The next morning The Three Investigators met in the school yard during the first break. Bob and Juve were already together when Pete approached them excitedly. “You won’t believe it!” he shouted from afar.

“What don’t we believe?” Bob wanted to know.

“Well, you’re not gonna believe what I just heard from Chris.”

“Chris?” Bob asked.

“Chris Moore, from my class. His father works for the police. And he—Mr Moore—had patrol duty last night, which is usually rather boring here in Rocky Beach. But there was a

break-in last night.” Pete looked at them expectantly.

“So what?” Jupiter asked without understanding. “What’s so extraordinary about that? This doesn’t happen every night in Rocky Beach, but it does happen, doesn’t it?”

The Second Investigator grinned triumphantly. “I haven’t told you where they broke in yet.”

“And where was there a break-in?” Bob asked impatiently. “You make it really hard for us sometimes, Pete.”

Pete ignored the swipe. “In the house of Mr Billy Ford, or William Benson, the late professor.”

Jupiter’s face brightened. “Aha,” he said. “Of course, this changes a lot. Did they catch the burglar?”

“I’m afraid not,” Pete replied.

“And was something stolen?” Bob wanted to know.

“That’s not out yet. Billy Ford lived alone and so no one could say for sure if anything was missing. In any case, the whole house was rummaged.”

“Hmm.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “The house belongs to the city after the execution of the will, but it has probably not yet been cleared out. It’s only been two days. But since Billy Ford’s death is no secret, it’s possible that an ordinary thief just wanted to dust off some valuables while nobody was in the house.”

“That’s right,” Bob interjected. “But since the house has been rummaged, this could indicate that the perpetrator or perpetrators were looking for something specific.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other and remained silent. Everybody thought the same thing, but nobody dared to make a guess.

After all, there was no evidence at all.

4. Stolen Information

“What actually happens in such cases,” Bob wanted to know when they made their way on their bicycles to the notary in the afternoon. “I mean, if a dead man’s house is robbed. Legally, the house and its contents only belonged to the city for two days. But is the city being compensated for the burglary or damage? And by whom? Does the city have insurance for this?”

“Pfff.” Pete shrugged his shoulders. “You’re asking so many questions. Don’t you have any other worries?”

“I’m interested,” Bob defended himself.

“Ask a lawyer,” Pete retorted.

“We’ll have an opportunity to do that right away,” Jupiter intervened and turned into the street where the notary’s house was located. It was a quiet residential area, where there were mainly detached houses with large gardens. He stopped at the sidewalk and The Three Investigators locked their bicycles together to a lamppost.

‘Steven Robinshaw, Notary’ was written on a sign at the driveway of a house. “This is the right place,” Jupiter remarked. “So he works from his home.” They then slowly walked towards the house.

“Hey!” Pete suddenly shouted and pointed his finger forward.

On the right side of the house, half hidden behind a hedge, a figure just climbed out of a window on the ground floor. He was wearing a dark mask. “Hey!” Pete ran towards the person. The intruder noticed him and ran away, behind the house. Without thinking, Pete ran after him. He jumped over the hedge, but had underestimated its height and got his foot caught in the top branches. Just in time, he was able to intercept his fall, but it took a moment for him to find a secure foothold again. There and then, he couldn’t see the fugitive.

He ran around the house into the large garden and just managed to see the figure climbing over a wire mesh fence onto the neighbouring property. Pete ran behind and jumped up the fence, clawed his fingers into the meshes and pulled himself up until he managed to swing one leg to the other side. Then he rolled over the fence to the other side and let himself fall. He felt a tug on his shoulder, then he heard a loud rattle, but did not pay any attention to it, but continued to run after the fugitive. He was now in the garden of the neighbour’s house, crossed it searching and circling the corner of the house. A black shadow jumped towards him. Pete backed off, startled.

A few centimetres in front of his chest, a shadow stopped abruptly in the air. A huge dog with frighteningly sharp teeth barked at him. Again and again he tugged at the chain with which he was tied to his hut, and the metal chain clanked continuously.

Pete imagined what would happen if the chain gave way. He quickly took a few steps back—and collided with an obstacle. He whirled around and looked into the reddened face of a fat, old and above all, angry man.

“What are you doing on my property?” he yelled at him.

“I...” began Pete, “Sir, I’ve been chasing a burglar who went into your garden...”

“Nobody broke into my house!” the man kept yelling and the hair, combed neatly over his balding head, went out of control and fell off the side of his head.

"I don't mean your house, but..." Pete tried again to explain his presence.

"I don't care!" the man continued screaming in an unchecked volume.

"But you did..."

"Go away," he continued, and his face turned so dark red that Pete feared seriously for the man's health. "Or should I first set the dog on you?"

"All right." Pete turned around and started to leave, but the dog, still barking loudly, made him head off in the other direction. He ran past the man, walked around the house and stepped out to the street. There he took a deep breath, then he looked down the street in both directions, but there were no signs of the figure.

Dejected, he went back to Mr Robinshaw's house, where Bob and Jupiter were waiting. His shrugging of his shoulders was enough answer for the two of them.

"So you didn't catch him," Jupiter guessed. "Too bad."

"You could have helped me," Pete replied irritably.

"We would have been slower than you anyway," Bob defended himself.

"Thank you very much. I had to deal alone with the angry neighbour and his dog."

"Nice T-shirt." Jupiter pointed to Pete's shoulder, where there was a long tear in the fabric.

Pete moaned. "Oh, no, that's one of my favourite T-shirts," he cried. "Stupid fence!"

The First Investigator waved. "Forget your T-shirt! Let's go and find Mr Robinshaw." He went to the front door and rang the bell, but then he noticed that the door was ajar. He opened the door a bit more and called: "Mr Robinshaw?"

Nothing moved. Jupiter gave his friends a questioning look, then pushed the door wide open and slowly entered the house. The others followed him. They were in a small hallway from which several doors branched off. They were all closed. Again Jupiter called the name of the owner, but there was no response. He looked around. "Where's the room from which the man climbed out of the window?" he asked.

Bob, who had a good sense of direction, looked at the various possibilities for a while and then pointed to the second door on the right.

Jupiter walked up to it and knocked. "Mr Robinshaw?" When nothing moved again, he slowly opened the door. Behind it was a large room, apparently it was the office. Mountains of files piled up on shelves on the walls and a huge desk dominated the room.

The First Investigator went in. Suddenly he noticed a movement from the corner of his eye and turned around in a flash. Behind the door stood a man who had lifted a large bat over his head ready to strike. When he saw Jupiter, he stared at him with amazement.

"You're not..." he started, then he noticed Bob and Pete. "... You're not the burglar."

"No, sir," said Jupiter and although he was still very frightened, he continued relatively calmly: "I am Jupiter Jones and these are my two friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. We saw the burglar. Pete chased, but didn't catch him." The man put the bat aside and reached out his hand to them.

"I'm Steven Robinshaw." He smiled sheepishly. "I'm really sorry about that... greeting, but I thought the guy was coming back."

"What exactly happened?" Pete wanted to know. "I only saw this darkly dressed figure climbing out of the window."

"I... Oh, please, sit down!" Mr Robinshaw offered them three chairs that stood in front of the desk. "I was upstairs when I heard a strange noise. I came downstairs and saw someone digging in my files in the office." He pointed to a filing cabinet, where some of the drawers were still pulled out. Some folders were lying on the floor.

“When I ran to him, he knocked me down with a paperweight and I was unconscious for a few seconds. That bump still hurts a lot.” Mr Robinshaw rubbed his head. “At some point I came back to myself, but the man was gone. I heard someone outside in the hall behind the door, but that was just you.”

“You should call the police, Mr Robinshaw,” Jupiter advised.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right, kid.” The notary reached for the phone and dialled the number of the police. In a nutshell, he described the incident, then hung up again. “The police will be here any minute.”

“Did you see the burglar’s face?” Bob asked, but Mr Robinshaw shook his head.

“No, he was wearing a mask or a stocking or something.” Then he asked suddenly: “What brings you here anyway?”

“One question,” Jupiter replied. “My uncle was with you two days ago. He was one of the heirs of Mr Bill Ford.”

“That’s right, did you say that your name is Jones... I remember your uncle had an unusual name.”

Jupiter nodded. “Titus.”

“Yes, that’s right, Titus Jones. What’s this all about?”

“There seems to have been some sort of mix-up with the inheritance,” Jupiter explained. “My uncle wants to contact the other two heirs to resolve the matter. He doesn’t know their names. We’re here to ask you if you could give us their names and contacts.”

But Mr Robinshaw shook his head. “I’m sorry, it’s not as simple as that. Besides, he’d have to contact me personally.”

Jupiter frowned and abruptly changed the subject. “Do you know what the burglar stole?”

The notary shook his head. “I haven’t got that far yet. And I have to ask you to leave now, because when the police come, I’ll be busy.”

“I have a hunch,” Jupe said. “Could you see if the files on Mr Bill Ford are still here?”

Mr Robinshaw raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “Why? You think that’s what the burglar was after? Does this have anything to do with the thing I read in the paper, with this double identity of Mr Ford?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Could be,” he replied casually. It was better not to tell Mr Robinshaw every detail of what he suspected.

The man stood up and walked over to the filing cabinet. He leafed through the papers for a while, then looked briefly at those on the floor. “The police told me to leave everything as it is,” he explained. “You’re right, the file on Mr Ford’s estate is missing! Like...” He was interrupted by the doorbell. “That will be the police. Wait a minute.” He left the room.

“Jupe,” Bob began. “How did you know that that file was missing?”

“Combination gift,” Jupe replied curtly. “I’ll explain later.”

Shortly afterwards, the notary came back to his office. “Well, boys, I’m sorry, but you really have to go now.”

A policeman with black hair followed behind Mr Robinshaw and looked at The Three Investigators in surprise. “Jupiter Jones and his colleagues,” he said in astonishment. “I hope it’s just a coincidence.”

“Hello, Inspector Cotta,” Jupiter greeted the man, pleased. “I don’t know if it’s a coincidence we’re here.”

Cotta was one of The Three Investigators’ two main contacts at the Rocky Beach Police Department, the other being the Chief of Police, Reynolds. Both had often helped the three detectives with their investigations, and in turn, the three had often provided information for

the police to solve criminal activities. In the course of time an almost friendly relationship had developed between them and the police.

“You know these three boys, Inspector?” asked Mr Robinshaw.

“I guess you could say that. And if they want anything from you, you can give them information without hesitation.”

Bob took advantage of the situation. “Do you remember the names of the other two heirs?” he asked the notary.

Robinshaw shook his head. “I deal with so many people every day, I’m afraid I can’t say anything without my documents. I’m sorry. I only remember Mr Titus Jones because of his unusual name.”

“If you do remember, would you please call us,” Jupiter asked. He took one of their business cards out of his pocket and handed it to the notary.

It said:



“Investigators?” Mr Robinshaw asked, surprised when he looked at the card.

“I’ll explain it to you in a minute,” Cotta interfered. “And you three should disappear now, I’ve got work to do. Goodbye, goodbye, and goodbye!”

The Three Investigators said goodbye to the notary and the inspector and left the house.

5. An Old Trick

“Now we already have two break-ins,” Jupiter noted, when all three were back at Headquarters. “And there are grounds for suspicion.”

“You mean...” Pete didn’t finish the sentence, but just looked over to the wooden box that was still on the desk.

“I’ve thought of that too,” Bob confessed. “Yesterday, when we heard about the break-in at Ford’s house, I kind of suspect something.”

“I’m just saying that there are grounds for suspicion,” Jupiter said. “The burglar might have something specific in mind. It could be one of the boxes Billy Ford bequeathed. Or even all three of them. Since the burglar did not find the item he was looking for in Ford’s house, he broke into Mr Robinshaw’s house to find out the addresses of the three heirs. He probably knew from the outset that there was no point just asking the notary. So he tried to get the documents by force. Well, what does that mean? He did it, didn’t he?”

“If only we knew what was in the other two boxes,” Pete thought. “But I don’t think we’ll find out so soon. Unless the notary remembers the names of the other heirs.”

“But we can’t count on that,” Jupe said. “We’ll have to figure out another way to track them down.”

“Am I getting this right?” Bob asked. “Do we have a new case? All we wanted to do was to find this Beany guy.”

“We will continue to do so,” Jupiter replied. “But by the way, we got two break-ins to deal with. And not to forget a strange stone that holds a secret. I think that sounds very promising—as a new case.”

“I think that sounds like work,” Bob disagreed. “What do you say, Pete?”

“I think... it sounds promising,” Pete replied with a grin. “We can take care of this.”

“All right,” Bob agreed. “But by next Wednesday we must have solved the case, because then is the solar eclipse and I want to enjoy it. You don’t see that every day.”

“Statistically, most people experience this only once in their lives anyway. Or not at all,” Jupiter told them, “so I’m also in favour of us solving the case by Wednesday. That means we don’t have much time to waste.”

“How should we proceed?” Pete asked. “How can we locate the heirs? Mr Ford didn’t have any relatives we could ask. We could visit his colleagues at the university, maybe they know who he was friends with.”

“Could be a possibility,” Bob said. “However, I had just thought of something else. An old trick.”

“What trick?” Pete was puzzled.

“Something we haven’t done in a long time, even though we’ve always been very successful with it.” He savoured the moment when the other two looked at him expectantly, then Bob said, “The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup.”

At first Pete laughed. The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup was Jupiter’s idea a long time ago. It worked in such a way that all three called a number of friends and told them what they wanted to know. These friends then called other friends or acquaintances and they in turn, called more and more people so that the message or question was spread very quickly across

the city. In past cases, The Three Investigators had used this method very successfully to contact thousands of people, whom they called ‘ghosts’ since they did not know who those people were.

And after Pete had thought about it for a while, he stopped laughing. “Not such a bad idea at all,” he confessed. “We can ask if anyone knows the heirs of Billy Ford. If enough people are involved, it should work.”

Jupiter nodded. “Rocky Beach isn’t that big. If these two heirs come from the city or at least from the area, it should work. Good idea, Bob.”

“Old tricks are always the best,” Bob remarked and then took out a piece of paper and a pencil. He wrote on it the specific message and question they wanted to pass on and how the ghosts were to contact them. “All right, let’s contact the ghosts. Who’s first?”

Now Pete had some doubts. “I don’t know,” he said. “Somehow I feel it’s embarrassing. What would people think when we let them in on our case and ask them to spread the message?”

“They’ll think that Pete Crenshaw is a twit,” Bob replied with a grin. “But it should not matter as long as we achieve our goals.”

The Second Investigator pulled a face. “I don’t know,” he repeated. “After all, I have a reputation to lose.”

“That would be new to me,” Bob gave back. “Well, come on, call someone. Your friends will not think of anything bad and even if was so, what other people think of you doesn’t matter. At least you shouldn’t care.”

Pete sighed. “All right. Whatever you say.” He reached for the phone and dialled the first number.

It took a long time for all three of them to make their calls and explain to the people what it was all about. By the time they were done, it was early evening.

“I’ll turn on the answering machine,” Jupe said. “Although I don’t expect the first calls to come until tomorrow.”

“If there are any at all,” Bob remarked. “We shouldn’t rejoice too soon.”

“You’re right.” The First Investigator looked at his watch. “Goodness!” he shouted. “I have a date with Lys at the movies in forty-five minutes. I’m sorry, but I have to go now...” He got up from his desk chair.

“Don’t panic,” Pete tried to reassure his friend. “You still have time!”

“I have to take a shower,” Jupiter disagreed. “All right, let’s get out of here. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” He pushed them outside, said a quick goodbye and then ran over to Jones’s house.

Bob and Pete got on their bikes and rode home. Although the sun was already approaching the horizon, it was still very warm outside.

“Since Jupe knows Lys, he’s quite a character, don’t you think?” Pete asked while they were riding down the street. “He used to want to discuss cases for hours, but now he’s throwing us out.”

Bob just shrugged his shoulders. “That suits me quite well, because I have a date with Elizabeth, too.”

“And I with Kelly,” Pete confessed. “But still, it used to be different somehow.”

“Better?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know. Just different. The girls have changed us a lot—especially Jupe.”

Jupiter actually didn't think about the case during the whole evening, but enjoyed his evening with Lys.

After the show, they went for a drink at a street café and talked about the movie. Since Lys had once been an actress, she knew her way around movies and often criticized things like editing or camera work, things that Jupiter alone would never have noticed. That night Jupiter went to bed very happy.

In the middle of the night, he woke up suddenly. His duvet had wrapped itself around his legs and the pillow was completely crumpled up. He must have had another one of his troubling dreams. But the memory of it faded so quickly that he already had nothing more in his head other than a few vague pictures and fragmentary scenes.

Jupiter rearranged the blanket and pillows, snuggled up and almost fell asleep again when he heard a noise. His room was on the first floor and the sound came from downstairs. Was Aunt Mathilda secretly plundering the fridge? But Jupiter had spent most of his life in this house and therefore knew the sounds of every door and every moving occupant very well.

So he quickly sensed that someone was running around in the living room. The footsteps didn't sound like Uncle Titus or Aunt Mathilda. Suddenly he was wide awake. He sat up, listened hard once more, then climbed out of bed and quietly opened the door to the hall. No doubt there was a stranger in the house. Carefully he sneaked to the stairs and stretched his head forward, but could not see anyone.

Then he noticed the dancing glow of a flashlight through a crack in the doorway leading to the lower hallway.

The First Investigator thought feverishly. Should he call the police? The phone was downstairs and the stranger would immediately hear if he picked up the handset. Besides, what if he was wrong after all? Maybe it was Uncle Titus who... Jupiter then put all his attention on his hearing, but it was quiet. The light of the flashlight had also disappeared. He waited a while, then went down the stairs as quietly as possible. He skipped the third step because he knew it would creak. He listened again at the landing, but it remained silent.

He walked past the phone table. Aunt Mathilda's letter opener laid there and Jupiter took it firmly in his hand. He did not know exactly what he wanted to do with it. But he felt more secured when he could hold on to an object that reminded him at least remotely of a weapon. He walked up to the living room door, which was just ajar. He still didn't hear a sound. Now, he thought, the only thing that would help was to take the intruder by surprise.

The light switch was located in the living room next to the door frame. Jupiter carefully put his hand through the door and pressed it. At the same instance, he pushed the door open with full force.

For a moment, the light dazzled him so strongly that he saw nothing. Then the door collided with an obstacle. Jupiter ignored it and jumped into the room and looked around once.

The living room was not very big and so he realized with one look that no one was here. Only then did he notice a cool breeze. The window was opened. Not only that, but also the doors of all the cupboards. And all the drawers as well.

6. Finally a Trace

“And you didn’t call the police?” Pete asked in surprise. “Why not? That was a big break-in, after all!”

They were standing in the school yard and Jupiter was telling his friends about his experience the night before.

“Because this is our case now. If I had called the police, they would have interfered unnecessarily. Also nothing was stolen as far as I could tell. The burglar was even so friendly and didn’t break anything. I put everything back in order and not even Aunt Mathilda noticed anything this morning. And you may guess three times why nothing was stolen.” Jupe didn’t wait for an answer. “Because what the burglar was after wasn’t in the house. By the way, he must have been in the other rooms, because the kitchen and the dining room had signs of being searched. But he didn’t find anything. For the object he wanted was not in the house, but at Headquarters.”

“So you really think he’s going after the stone?” Bob asked.

“It’s pretty clear to me now. This would be break-in number three involving Billy Ford and his legacy. The thief found out Uncle Titus’s name and address from the documents he stole at the notary’s and then came to steal the stone from us.”

“But how did he know that Uncle Titus had the stone? It could also have been with one of the other two heirs,” Pete interjected.

“Maybe he didn’t know, so he’d just have to try his luck,” Jupe replied. “Or he had already broken in to other two.”

“Did you check for fingerprints?” Bob asked.

Jupiter nodded. “I rushed over to Headquarters—first to see if the stone was still there, second to get our fingerprint powder from the lab. I left the stone in the trailer, which is probably the best hiding place at the moment. But I wasn’t very successful with the fingerprints, the guy must have worn gloves.” Jupiter yawned. “You see, I had an exhausting night. I had to clean up and wipe away the stupid fingerprint powder so that Aunt Mathilda would not notice anything. I’m surprised she didn’t wake up anyway.”

“I just hope we find this Beany soon,” Bob said. “Maybe he’ll shed some light on the matter. At the moment our mysterious opponent is miles ahead of us and it was fortunate for us that he didn’t get the stone. Hopefully our Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup is successful.”

“Speaking of the Hookup,” Pete said. “A guy in the my next class just asked me if I was that Pete Crenshaw.”

“The Pete Crenshaw who’s a twit?” Bob joked.

“That’s the one. He had been called by a friend and asked about an inheritance. You should have seen that stupid grin that guy had on his face—a look of pure contempt like he thinks I’m the last idiot. In the end, he asked me if playing detective would be fun.”

“And what did you answer?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“Nothing at all. I left.”

“That was the only reasonable reaction,” Bob thought. “Just don’t worry about such idiots. Besides, it’s the weekend now and by Monday, many people would have forgotten about the Hookup.”

After school, the three went straight to the salvage yard and stormed into Headquarters to check out the answering machine. But they were disappointed when they opened the door, because the red light did not shine. So nobody had called.

"What a bummer," Jupe remarked.

"And what now?" Pete asked.

"Let's get something to eat first," Jupe suggested.

Bob and Pete called their parents to tell them that they were having lunch with Jupiter, because Uncle Titus's stew was enough for everyone.

During the meal, Jupiter secretly watched his aunt and uncle. Did they really not notice the break-in the past night? But the two behaved as always so they probably did not notice anything.

Jupiter relaxed.

"How far have you got in your investigation?" Uncle Titus asked. "Have you found out who Beany is yet?"

"Unfortunately, no." Jupiter shook his head. "But that could change today."

"Well, take your time. I don't want your school work to suffer because you're investigating this case."

"And you really can't remember the names of the other two people who were at the execution of the will?" Jupe asked.

Uncle Titus shook his head. "I didn't know anyone but the mayor, and I forgot all their names."

After dinner, they went back to Headquarters. This time the light on the answering machine was on. "Hey!" cried Pete enthusiastically. "There's a message! I hope it's not just Lys." He rewound the tape and a squeaky, unfamiliar voice came over the speaker:

"Hello, this is Tim Conrad. Your enquiry has reached me and if I have understood that correctly, you are looking for someone who received an inheritance. Well, half a year ago, my aunt inherited some carpets from a distant relative in Europe. If that's any use to you, you can call me back." The caller then gave his number and hung up.

Pete sighed. "He didn't get it right. The Hookup is a bit like hit-and-miss. You never know what's going to end up when the message is passed down so many different people."

Frustrated, they sat down and stared at the phone. That seemed to work, because a short time later it rang again. Jupiter picked up the phone and switched on the loudspeaker. "The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Hello, this is Debbie Hanson. My cousin Marsha told me you were looking for Mr Ford's heirs."

"Yeah, right. I'm glad you called, Debbie," Jupiter replied. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes, my mother was at the notary's on Wednesday and received a funny thing. Mr Ford was an old acquaintance of hers, but not a very close one, so she was very surprised that she had even been asked to attend the execution of his will."

"What kind of funny thing was that?" Jupiter asked.

"Hard to say. It was such a long glass thing. None of us knew what to do with it."

"You said 'knew'," Jupiter said.

"Yes, my mother does not have it anymore," Debbie replied.

"Can we visit your mother?" Jupiter asked. The few things Debbie said sounded promising but he preferred to hear the story personally.

"It should be OK."

"Is it convenient for you tonight?"

“Sure. At eight?”

“Good, if you could give me your address...” After Jupiter had noted down the address, he hung up. “Finally a lead,” he said. “It’s about time.”

“What did Debbie mean when she said her mother didn’t have the thing anymore?” Bob asked.

“We’ll find out tonight.”

Mrs Hanson and her daughter did not live far away from the Art Gallery Hall, Rocky Beach’s small art museum. Debbie was already waiting for them when they parked their bikes on the street. She was a pretty girl with reddish brown hair.

“So you’re The Three Investigators,” she said. “I’ve read about you in the papers before. Is this another one of your cases?”

“You could say so,” Jupiter replied, and then he introduced Pete and Bob.

Debbie led her into the little house and introduced them to her mother. They sat down in the very bourgeois-furnished living room.

“Debbie said you wanted to know about Billy Ford and his legacy,” Mrs Hanson said. “What exactly is this all about?”

“We want to know what Mr Ford left you and whether anything unusual has happened to you lately,” Jupiter told her.

Mrs Hanson looked at him suspiciously. “To answer your first question, Mr Ford left me a glass thing in a long wooden box. I think it was glass, anyway.”

“Could it have been lead crystal?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, it’s possible, but it shone very brightly.”

“Was it red?” Jupiter continued.

“No, it’s colourless, like glass.”

“What did it look like?”

“Well, it was very long, maybe a metre or so, and it was pointed on one side,” Mrs Hanson replied. “Yes, it almost looked like the blade of an oversized knife or sword, except that it had no handle. It seemed very fragile because it was so long and thin. Well, I can’t describe it any better than that.”

“Your daughter said you didn’t have that thing anymore,” Bob said. “Where is it now?”

Mrs Hanson looked at him seriously. “That’s the weirdest thing. There was a letter in the box in which Mr Ford wrote to me that this glass thing was not meant for me at all, but for someone else, and I should pass it to him.”

“Who’s that somebody?” Pete wanted to know. “Does his name happen to be Beany?”

“Beany? No. I was supposed to give the item to Benjamin Whitehead, who was a casual acquaintance of Mr Ford and mine, but we didn’t know each other very well. Well, and that’s what I did, because I really couldn’t do anything with the glass thing. I thought it was weird, but whatever it was, I have got rid of it. But why are you so interested in it?”

“My uncle was also one of the heirs,” Jupiter explained. “Titus Jones. Perhaps you saw him at the notary’s. He’s the little man with the moustache.”

“Oh yes, I remember,” Mrs Hanson said. “He seemed as if he was as out of place as the other man and me.”

“That’s right. He had also inherited a glass object and was told to pass it on to a person by the name of Beany,” Jupiter continued. “The only thing is that my uncle doesn’t know anyone by that name. Could Mr Benjamin Whitehead be Beany? Is that his nickname?”

Mrs Hanson shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. It's possible. Actually, I don't know Mr Whitehead that well."

"Could you give us his address so we can ask him?" Bob asked.

"Yeah, I'd love to, I'll write it down for you." She got a notepad and wrote something down. Meanwhile, she continued: "But since you just asked me about something unusual, perhaps I should also tell you that there was indeed a strange incident."

Her daughter said to them, "We were broken into last night. Someone's been through all our cabinets."

"But nothing has been stolen, right?" Jupiter added.

"How do you know that?" Debbie asked in surprise. "Does this have something to do with your case? Are we the victims of someone or something?"

"Victims? No, I don't think so." The First Investigator smiled awkwardly. "But it's quite possible that this has something to do with the glass thing. As you don't have it anymore, and if the burglar knows this, he should not be coming again."

"The police were here too," Debbie continued. "But they didn't find any fingerprints or anything else. Can't you tell us something about this?"

"We don't know very much either," confessed Pete. "It would be too early to say anything about it. But if we're any closer, we would tell you."

"Sure, now, that sounds really exciting!" Debbie remarked.

Mrs Hanson handed them the note with the address.

"Then we'd better go there right now," Bob suggested.

"Tonight might not be good. I happen to know that on Fridays, Mr Whitehead visits his club," Debbie's mother remarked. "He owns a big textile factory and on Fridays the big wigs of some local business always meet. Probably you can try tomorrow."

"Hmm, too bad," Jupiter said. "But thank you very much for your help. That was very kind of you."

"You're welcome," Mrs Hanson replied, escorting the three to the door. They said goodbye.

On the way home, Bob said, "You see, Pete, there are people who won't make fun of you when you're playing detective!"

They had decided to see Mr Whitehead the next morning. Since it was Saturday, they hoped to meet him at home. Pete drove his MG, picked up Bob and was now at the salvage yard.

"Well rested?" the First Investigator asked in a good mood. "I'm curious to see if we can bring light into the darkness. I would like to know what the stone and the other objects are all about and why someone is so keen on them. I wonder if the third heir was also broken into. Did he inherit anything for Beany, too?"

"Hopefully we'll find out soon enough," Pete said. "Let's go there. Do you have the stone?"

"Wait a minute," Jupe replied and went over to the trailer Headquarters. He took the key for the padlock out of his pocket, but then he suddenly froze. "No!" he shouted.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"Someone broke the lock!" He pointed to the clearly visible scratches on the hinge. On the ground in the sand lay the lock cut to pieces with a bolt cutter. Jupe opened the door to the trailer and jumped in, Bob and Pete followed him. After some searching they confirmed their worst fears.

"The stone is gone!" Jupe cried.

7. The Opaque Mr Whitehead

Mr Whitehead's house was located in a quiet residential area north of Rocky Beach, on the edge of the National Park in the Santa Monica Mountains. A large, wild garden shielded the view from the street.

Pete parked at the side of the road and they walked up a few steps to the front door. Jupiter rang the bell.

After a while, a man in his mid-fifties opened the door. He wore a black suit and had straight back combed black hair. He looked at the three boys from top to bottom before asking, "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Are you Mr Whitehead?" Jupiter asked.

"No. May I ask what do you want from him?"

"We'd like to see him, if that's possible." Jupiter introduced himself and his two friends.

"Did you have an appointment with Mr Whitehead?" the man asked.

"No, we..." Jupiter began, but was interrupted by another man who had appeared from inside the house.

"What is it, Ben?" he asked.

"There are three boys here who would like to see, sir," the first man replied.

Mr Whitehead approached them. He had full white hair and wore a red housecoat. In his hand he held a pipe and reminded Jupiter of an aged Sherlock Holmes. "What's it about?"

"Hello, Mr Whitehead," Jupiter said. "We would like to talk to you. It's about Mr Bill Ford and the inheritance."

Mr Whitehead frowned. "Yes?" he asked, expecting further details.

"My uncle is one of the heirs," Jupiter continued. "We might have something that interest you."

Mr Whitehead's face lit up.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Come on in." He made an inviting gesture and The Three Investigators entered the house. A narrow hallway led to a large living room at the back of the house. It was sparsely furnished. Mr Whitehead went straight on and through a large glass door, he led them to a sunny terrace where some garden chairs stood. He offered them a seat and The Three Investigators sat down under a warm sun.

"You have a magnificent view from here, Mr Whitehead," Pete remarked. From the terrace one had a fantastic view of the Santa Monica Mountains, whose dense forests alternated with orange groves.

"That's why I spend most of the weekends here," he replied and sat down in a fourth garden chair. "Ben, would you please get my guests something to drink," he turned to the butler. "What would you like?"

"Oh, uh," Jupiter began, still surprised by the kindness of the host. "Water would be fine." Bob and Pete chose the same and Ben disappeared into the house.

"My uncle attended the execution of Mr Ford's will," Jupiter began. "That seemed very strange to him because he barely knew him. He inherited a small wooden box and there was a letter in it telling him to pass the contents to a person named Beany. Are you that Beany?"

Mr Whitehead laughed. "Yeah, right, Billy used to call me that. The good guy died way too soon. But who's your uncle, anyway?"

"Titus Jones."

"Titus..." Mr Whitehead began to think, but then his face brightened. "Titus Jones! The man from the petrol station!"

Jupiter smiled. "Yes, my uncle once worked at a petrol station. Now he operates a salvage yard. He told me he knew Billy Ford from that time. But he couldn't remember you."

The host rubbed his chin and then took a puff on his pipe. "That's probably because he doesn't know me by the name of Beany. My first name is Benjamin, but Billy Ford never called me that. I played cards with him and your uncle, but that was probably over twenty years ago. I can well imagine he can't remember my nickname. How did you find out my real name?"

"That wasn't easy," Bob said. "But we have found one of the other two heirs and learned of you. Can you maybe explain to us what this whole thing is all about? If Mr Ford wanted you to inherit something, why didn't he have it given to you directly? Why this hide-and-seek game?"

Mr Whitehead laughed again. "Because he was a joker. I have to admit, his kind of humour is a bit strange and I didn't understand the whole thing that way either. I myself was very surprised when Mrs Hanson and Mr Marks showed up a few days ago to give me their share of the inheritance. But that was Billy's way. He never did anything directly." Benjamin Whitehead laughed again and for the first time Jupiter thought that it sounded a bit forced.

"Mrs Hanson told us that her object was some kind of a glass rod," Jupiter said. "What was the item given to this Mr Marks?"

Mr Whitehead waved off. "Harmless kitsch, no more important. Ah, here comes Ben with the drinks."

The butler placed the glasses on the table and poured into each one from a carafe filled with ice water. Then he disappeared again. Peter watched as Ben returned to the living room. The Second Investigator had the impression that the butler had just disappeared around the corner, but not out of the room.

"Can I see what your uncle received?" asked Mr Whitehead, drawing Pete's attention back to the conversation. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's why we're here," Jupiter confirmed. "Unfortunately, we didn't bring anything. The item that was to be passed to you was stolen from us last night."

Benjamin Whitehead, who had a puff on his pipe again, started coughing. "The stone is stolen?" he exclaimed when his breath had calmed down again.

"You know it was a stone?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes, yes, I know what Billy was going to send me," Mr Whitehead said. "But why was it stolen? How do you...? Who...?" He had become very pale and looked from one investigator to the other with his eyes wide open.

"A few days ago, someone broke into my uncle's house," Jupiter's expression had become very serious. "However, the burglar did not steal anything. Last night we had a second break-in. Unfortunately, this time he found what he was looking for. He took the stone."

Suddenly Juve's voice became very demanding. "What's with the stone? Who would want it? And what is it for?"

"I don't... I don't know. It's actually a worthless stone," Mr Whitehead replied.

"But it seems to be very important to you as well," Jupiter said directly.

"Yeah, that's right, it's... it's kind of a collector's item," Mr Whitehead explained. "It's from Africa, you know. Billy had brought it back from a trip, and I... I just thought it was beautiful and wanted to buy it from him, but he didn't want to part with it then. It was the same with the other two items. It's just things that I would like. That's probably why Billy made up this game of hide-and-seek in his will. He wanted to play around with me because he knew exactly how much I was after the items.

"But as I said—the material value is a joke, nobody could do much with it. Maybe the burglar thought it was a valuable gem. The whole thing must be a stupid misunderstanding." Slowly Mr Whitehead had himself under control again, but his sudden outburst gave the First Investigator a lot to think about.

"I don't think it was a misunderstanding," Jupe disagreed. "There have been three other break-ins as far as we know. Mr Ford's house had been rummaged. The notary who administered the will had the inheritance documents stolen. And Mrs Hanson's house was also broken into. But the burglar didn't take anything from her. I suppose that was because she had already given you the item the burglar was looking for. And I wouldn't be surprised if that Mr Marks had an unwanted visitor."

Benjamin Whitehead had become a little paler again.

"Do you know what's behind this, Mr Whitehead?" Jupiter asked sharply.

"I don't know! I really have no idea," he replied. "There must be some mistake. Or a coincidence."

"May we see the other two items?" Pete asked. "Maybe this will give us an idea of what this is really about. We still do not know whether the burglar wants only one particular object or perhaps even all three."

Whitehead hesitated a bit, but then he nodded. "All right. Come with me, I'll show you." He got up and led The Three Investigators back into the house. There they entered a simply-furnished study with a large desk and a number of bookshelves reaching up to the ceiling. On the desk, two objects lay on a green cushion: a long glass rod that actually looked like a sword blade, and a glass cross with a notch in one of its arms.

"A sword!" Pete said immediately. "This cross seems to be a kind of handle. If you put the blade and the cross together, it's a sword."

"It doesn't seem to connect like that," Bob remarked. "There's no way to connect the two parts. The centre seems to be missing."

"The stone?" Jupiter suspected.

"Right," Whitehead said. "The three objects belong together and form a sword. Only it's incomplete now that the stone is missing."

"What material are the blade and the handle made of?" asked Jupiter.

"Lead crystal," Whitehead answered. "So it's not very valuable."

"Nevertheless, there must be a reason why someone is particularly interested in the stone or the whole sword," Bob remarked. "You want the stone back, don't you?"

"Of course. Without the stone, the sword is incomplete."

"Then I suggest we call the police," Jupiter said. "After all, there have been five break-ins so far, and something should be done about them."

"The police?" Suddenly Mr Whitehead became very nervous. "I don't think that's really necessary. After all, no one else got hurt except me, and I doubt that the police would want to deal with a trifle issue like a cheap glass item."

"But it's important to you," Jupiter said. "I don't understand why..."

"No," Whitehead interrupted him decisively. "The police would only cause unnecessary trouble."

When Jupiter replied, Pete noticed a movement from the corner of his eye. He turned around. The door of the study was still open. While Benjamin Whitehead and Jupiter continued to talk to each other, Pete strolled through the room as inconspicuously as possible and approached the door. He took a look in the hallway. The butler Ben stood a few metres away from the study, wiping the picture frames in the corridor with a dust cloth. He ignored the boy. Pete went back again.

"Then I suggest we take care of it," the First Investigator said.

"You? What do you mean by that?" asked Whitehead.

"We know how to recover lost or stolen things," Jupiter said, handing Whitehead one of their business cards.

He studied the card carefully. "So, you're investigators." He looked at them with a mixture of amusement and doubt. "Are you serious?"

Bob nodded. "We've already solved many cases."

"How much is your fee?" asked Whitehead with a tone that the three felt that he still didn't take them seriously.

However, Jupiter did not allow himself to be put off. "We don't ask for a fee for our work. But that can be up for discussion if we complete the task to your satisfaction."

"And how are you going to go about this?"

"We'll think of something," confessed the First Investigator. "But we can't give you a guarantee."

"All right, you can try. But you better leave the police out of this. I do not want to burden them unnecessarily with such trifling issues."

"As you say, sir," Juve agreed. "Then we say goodbye now."

"Yes, you have work to do now," Whitehead replied and winked at them. "It was nice meeting you."

"We'll get back to you as soon as we know anything," Jupiter said.

The man escorted them to the door and said goodbye. The Three Investigators got on their bicycles and headed towards the city centre. Only when they were far enough from the house did they talk about their visit to Whitehead.

"That guy is very strange," Bob said. "There's something uneasy about him."

"I think so too," Jupiter said. "In fact, I would say that there's a lot wrong with him. He was really shocked when we told him about the theft of the stone."

"It's supposed to be just a worthless kitsch," Bob added. "And when you suggested calling the police, he got very nervous."

"Right, and I find that rather suspicious," Juve added. "After all, it wasn't his place that was broken into, it was ours twice and three others."

"Why did you suggest he contact the police?" Pete wanted to know. "Didn't you want to keep Reynolds and his people out of this?"

"I still want to keep them out. I never seriously considered going to the police either," Juve replied. "I just wanted to see how Whitehead would react."

"By the way, he wasn't the only one who acted weird," Pete remarked. "There was his butler, Ben. I think he's been watching and listening. At first I had the feeling that he was standing behind the door to the terrace, and later he was always very close to the door to the study. So he probably heard every word we said."

"All in all, two highly opaque people," the First Investigator summarized. "We should be very careful how we deal with Whitehead next time... that is if there is a next time. How are we going to proceed now?"

"I thought you knew," Bob said, "after you so generously offered our services."

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. Do you have any ideas?” The two of them shook their heads. “Then I suggest we all go home now. It’s lunch time anyway. Think about our next steps and this afternoon we’ll meet at Headquarters for a brainstorming session.”

The problem kept Jupiter so busy that he even lacked appetite for Aunt Mathilda’s excellent lasagne.

Fortunately, Uncle Titus was just back on the road to a customer, so Jupe didn’t have to tell him that the stone was stolen. But even after a lot of hard thinking he had no more than a few isolated ideas, so he was far away from a concrete plan. He hoped that Bob and Pete could come up with some ideas, even though he didn’t expect it.

In the afternoon they met as agreed at Headquarters. Bob had brought a new padlock for the door and handed each of his two friends a new key. “Hopefully this’ll last longer,” he said.

“And?” Jupiter asked expectantly. “Have you had any ideas?”

“I suggest we visit this Mr Marks, the third heir of Billy Ford,” Pete said. “We can ask him if he had a break-in, and if so, then maybe the guy left a trace. We can get his address from the phone book.”

Then Bob said: “And we could do a check on Billy Ford. If he was in possession of this strange three-part sword, then perhaps someone might have been after the thing before he died. He had no more relatives, but he was a professor at the university. Maybe a colleague there knows a little more about him.”

“Well, that would be exactly the ideas I had,” confessed Jupiter. “I can’t think of anything else at the moment.”

“This is really unfortunate. You should do more sports, then your brain would be better supplied with blood and you may have more ideas,” Pete suggested.

“Yes, thank you for suggesting that,” Jupiter replied sarcastically. At that moment, the phone rang. Jupiter first switched on the loudspeaker so that his friends could hear the conversation, then he picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking.”

A muffled, dull voice was heard: “16 Newton Street. There you’ll find the stone. Be careful.” That was followed by a click and the connection was broken.

8. Pete's Solo Effort

"What was that?" Pete exclaimed while Jupiter was still holding the phone.

"Did you recognize the voice?" the First Investigator asked excitedly.

"No. You?" Pete replied, excited.

Jupiter shook his head disappointed. "Was that meant to be serious? Or was it a joke?"

"A joke?" Bob doubted. "By whom? Hardly anyone knows we're looking for the stone. And the people who know it are themselves interested in finding it."

"Then it could be a trap," Pete surmised. "Maybe someone's trying to lure us to a certain place."

"Who could it be then?" Bob asked.

"The thief of the stone," Pete suggested. "Maybe he wasn't interested in the stone at all, but with us, and now he wants to lure us in or even blackmail us with it."

"Or maybe not," Jupiter calmly replied, for he did not believe in the hasty conclusions that Pete so often drew. "But I'm afraid there's only one way to find out. We need to get to 16 Newton Street."

"What if it is a trap after all?" Pete asked.

"Then we will be prepared," Juve answered.

"How do you prepare?" Pete countered. "You don't even know what to expect."

"If someone calls us to tell us that we'll find the stone in a house on Newton Street, then we first have to assume that this is true," Jupiter said. "For all other possibilities we must keep our eyes open."

"And when will you go there?" Bob asked. "Not now, is it?"

"No. Tonight," Juve replied. "Luckily tomorrow is Sunday, so we don't have to worry about school. Newton Street, that's west of Rocky Beach, if I'm not mistaken. I am curious to see what awaits us there."

Pete and Jupiter were already at Headquarters, collecting their equipment when Bob finally arrived. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "My parents watched a late movie, I couldn't sneak out earlier. I'm sure they wouldn't be thrilled if I went out so late. Did you get everything together yet?"

Jupiter nodded. Pete also had to sneak out of his house. It was easier for the First Investigator. He could always say to Aunt Mathilda that he wanted to sleep in the trailer, because there were still many important things to do there.

"We're good to go." They left Headquarters and got into Bob's Beetle. They had decided to take the car because of the cold weather. Bob drove west through the deserted streets of Rocky Beach. Newton Street was located in a quite posh area and Bob parked his car at a side street a short distance away.

"We should walk the last stretch," he suggested. "A car can be very conspicuous. And above all, loud."

They got out and walked slowly down Newton Street. The house with the number 16 hardly differed from the other large family houses in that area. The only difference was the

illuminated window on the ground floor. Almost all the other houses in the area were dark and the street was quiet and completely deserted.

To be on the safe side, The Three Investigators hid in the shade of some trees along the road and watched the house from a distance.

“Now what?” Pete whispered, although no one on the street could hear him anyway.

“Now we’ll take a closer look at the house,” Jupiter decided. “That’s why we’re here.”

“Wrong. We’re here to get the stone back!” the Second Investigator quipped. “But apparently someone is still awake, so we better disappear again.”

“After all this effort?” Bob asked. “I think Jupiter is right. Now that we’re here, we can at least take a look around.” Without saying a word, he went across the street to the house. The view through the illuminated window was obstructed by a curtain, but at least it could be seen that there was no one directly behind the window. Bob looked down the street once more in both directions, and then he entered the front garden.

Suddenly a light came on and the garden was lit up as bright as daylight. Without thinking, Bob jumped back, ran across the road and hid behind a parked car. He had also heard Jupe and Pete run away, but didn’t know where they went. Carefully he looked over the hood of the car and over to the house. He expected to see an old man armed with a shotgun step out the door to defend his property, but nothing moved. After about a minute the light went out and the property was again in darkness, except for the window, which was still lit.

“Bob?” he heard a voice whispering behind him. He turned around. Jupe and Pete stepped out from behind a tree.

“That was pretty frivolous, don’t you think?” asked the First Investigator.

“It was just the motion detector,” Bob replied.

“Exactly,” Pete added. “It’s not likely that someone was standing behind one of the dark windows watching us.”

“Yeah, and it would be pure coincidence if someone did notice us,” Bob said. “We also have a motion detector and every now and then the light goes on just like that when a cat roams the garden or something. Nobody thinks anything of it.”

“All right,” Pete interfered. “And how do we get to the house now without the lights turning on?”

“We must try to avoid the motion detector,” Jupiter decided. “If we move as far as possible from the edge of the property, the light may not turn on.”

This time they approached the house from the side and jumped over a small hedge that separated the front garden from the garage entrance. Then they ran to a bush by the house wall and squatted behind it. The motion sensor hadn’t picked them up, so it stayed dark.

“And now what?” Pete whispered.

“We’ll walk around the house carefully,” Jupiter suggested, just about to get up when a car came along the street. It moved very slowly and finally stopped right in front of number 16. The headlights were then turned off, the engine sound died and a door opened. The Three Investigators could see two people in the light of the car interior, but only one got out and walked towards the house. Again the light went on through the motion detector and the three secret observers crouched a little deeper into the shade of the bush so as not to be seen. They saw a tall, slender woman with short, dark hair, walked purposefully towards the door and rang the bell. Through the branches of the bush, The Three Investigators were able to observe the woman without being seen. A few seconds later, the door opened.

“Hello, Mary,” said a dark voice. “Are you alone?”

“Hi, Stan. Jeffrey’s coming.” She pointed to the car.

“Were you here a little earlier?” Stan asked. “I noticed the outside light lit up a while ago.”

“No, it wasn’t me. I just came.”

“Well, I guess it was a cat or something.”

Bob briefly looked over at Jupiter and gave him a triumphant look.

“We can go in. Jeffrey will be coming soon. He’s still on the phone in the car. Leave the door open,” said Mary and shortly afterwards both disappeared into the house.

It remained silent for slightly less than a minute. Suddenly Pete had an idea. Mary and Stan were already inside, the outside light was still on, and Jeffrey was still in the car... He quickly looked over to the car, stood up and ran towards the front door, quietly but swiftly!

“Pete!” Bob whispered in horror, trying to hold his friend by his arm. But it was already too late. In that instant, Bob also thought about running there too, but Jupe held him tight and looked at him imploringly. In the meantime, Pete had reached the door, peered cautiously in once and then disappeared into the house!

“He’s gone crazy!” Bob was upset. “We must...”

“... do nothing,” Jupiter interrupted him. “We’re staying here. It’s enough that one of us is crazy.”

But Bob looked at him and said that he was scared about Pete’s going in there alone. “The walkie-talkie!” he said suddenly. “Pete’s got his with him. We should turn it on so he can reach us in an emergency.”

The First Investigator nodded approvingly. He took the walkie-talkie out of his small backpack, pulled out the antenna and switched it on. Now all they could do was to watch and wait.

Pete hoped Stan or Mary had not seen him. Those were his first thoughts when he suddenly found himself in a small passageway which was very dimly lighted. Only then did he realize what he had just done. Had he taken leave of his senses? What was he doing in that house?

Fortunately, Stan and Mary had already went somewhere else and Pete had to concentrate to make out where they were. He then heard voices coming from another room—the one with the illuminated window, as he quickly noticed. It was probably a meeting room. He took a few steps towards the door to listen. He could hear three different voices—Mary, Stan, and a third person. What was said, however, he could not hear very well.

The light in the front garden, which fell through a corridor window, went off. Now Pete stood in the sparse light of the passageway lighting. He would have liked to have turned them off, because he felt very watched.

Suddenly the light outside came on again. That could only indicate that Jeffrey was coming to the door! Feverishly, Pete looked around for a hiding place. To the right of the door was a staircase and under the steps was a small and empty niche. As quietly and quickly as possible Pete jumped over and hid himself in the niche.

Not a moment too soon, Jeffrey entered the doorway and closed the main door behind him. He walked up to the meeting room door where Pete had been listening at earlier, opened it and entered the room. The door swung back, but it didn’t close completely.

Pete then noticed that the niche in which he had been hiding at had a door. It was unlocked so he opened it quietly and discovered that the niche was actually an entrance to the basement. With dim lighting, he could only see a bit of a narrow stone staircase that led steeply down. But that didn’t interest him now. He quietly went back to the meeting room door, which had remained slightly ajar, and continued listening.

“We’re complete,” said Stan, the man who opened the door to Mary. “We will inform the rest of the Covenant when we have the whole sword.”

“If we ever have it complete,” Mary interjected.

“We will. The stone has reappeared. It’s a sign! For years the sword was lost, and now, a few days before the day and night unite, it reappears. That can only be a good omen.”

“Will you show it to us?” Jeffrey asked.

“Yes,” Stan said. “Come with me to the basement.”

Pete heard footsteps approaching the door and quickly ran back to the niche and squeezed in there to hide. Only then did he realize what the man had just said: “Come with me to the basement.” And Pete was crouching right by the stairs leading down to the basement. Very quickly he wanted to leave the niche again, but it was already too late. The door of the meeting room opened. Pete had only one way to escape being discovered—down to the basement!

9. The Burning Sword

Pete hurried quietly down the stairs into the darkness of the basement. Luckily, he was wearing sneakers, so his footsteps were barely audible. Already after a few steps it was so pitch dark that he could only proceed by carefully groping along the wall.

The stairs made a bend and Pete squeezed around the corner. He was surprised that the four had not yet come down the stairs, so he paused. Did Stan meant another basement? But after some time the Second Investigator heard footsteps on the stairs and he hurried to get further down. Behind him he saw a flickering shimmer of light. Apparently they had brought candles. Pete wondered if there was any electric lighting there.

Suddenly his hand, with which he had previously held on to the wall, reached a void. The stairs reached the bottom, and before him was boundless darkness. Pete groped around, finally touched the wall of an adjoining passage and slid along it to the right. Apparently he was at the basement hallway. He could only hope that the path would soon make a turn-off or that those three would choose the other direction, otherwise they would see him immediately.

The four figures reached the bottom of the stairs, but Pete could not clearly see them in the faint glow of the candles they held in their hands. However, he could still make out that they looked strange and different. Pete held his breath and expected to be seen at any moment, but the candlelight did not reach so deep into the passage. When they went in the other direction, he breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly they moved away from him and finally they disappeared completely. They must have gone around a corner.

Pete followed behind them quietly. At the corner, he listened before he took a look around the bend. The four figures just disappeared behind another turn-off. When Pete reached there, he saw that the passage ended and led into a large room. The people were about to light some other candles that made the room brighter, forcing Pete to hide behind the bend again so as not to be seen. But the brief moment was enough to see why the four people now looked different than they did before: they wore dark red robes that looked like night shirts and were low-cut at the front. He had noticed a tattoo on Stan's chest.

"In the name of the sword... bow," Stan said with a deep, awe-inspiring voice. A soft rustling could be heard, then the impressed murmurs of the other three people.

"The stone!" whispered Mary. "After so many years... finally!" She mumbled something quietly to herself that Pete could not make out, but it reminded him of a prayer. The others joined in the whispering and together it sounded like an eerie choir.

When they had finished, Stan said: "Here is to the rebirth of the Covenant of the Sword. *When day and night unite, the burning sword will be on fire! And the fire of power is the weapon of the Covenant!*"

The last two sentences were repeated by everyone present in the choir and a shiver ran down the Second Investigator's back. The group then proceeded to murmur something continuously. Suddenly Pete felt like he wasn't alone in that hallway. Someone—or something—seemed to whisper something to him. But then he realized that it was only the soft echo that was reflected back from the cold concrete walls. After a while, the murmurs ended. Pete supposed that that was the end of the ritual. Then he heard a conversation between those people.

“We don’t have the sword yet. Just the stone,” Jeffrey said. “And what’s worse, we only have four days left.”

“That’s right. We must now use all our strength to get the burning sword complete. But where are the other two parts?” Stan said.

“We didn’t find anything at two of William Benson’s heirs,” another voice said. “We were only successful at that Jones’s place. But it was only after we had accidentally found that that fat kid had something to do with it. Somehow, he and his friends showed up at Mrs Hanson’s.”

“The boys seem to know more. We should have them watched. We must find out where the other parts of the sword are,” Stan said.

“Then let’s not waste any time,” Mary said.

“If this time we can’t manage to put the burning sword together, we’ll have to wait years or even decades for another opportunity,” Stan said with an authoritative voice.

“You’re right. The stone is safe here. Let’s get the other parts here too,” said another voice.

The light suddenly became weaker, the candles were gradually extinguished. The Second Investigator ran back to the turn-off, but in his hurry he stumbled over a small unevenness in the ground and could only catch himself on the wall at the last moment.

“What was that?” he heard a voice said. “I heard something!” Pete sneaked around the corner and stopped there, his heart pounding.

“Probably just a rat,” Stan said reassuringly. “I’m afraid they run around the basement from time to time.”

“Are you sure?” the voice asked.

“Of course. Or do you think I have intruders in my house?” Stan laughed loudly and it echoed eerily from the walls. “Come on, let’s go back upstairs.”

Pete heard footsteps approaching him and hurried to run to where he had been hiding earlier. He got in a deep shadow and waited, holding his breath. The four people reached the stairs and climbed up slowly. Only when he heard no more sound on the stone steps did he breathe a sigh of relief.

Then he thought. He had heard a lot and the smartest thing to do then was to leave the house as soon as possible. On the other hand, they had come here to retrieve the stone.

Pete had to make a decision. He felt his way along the wall back to the room where the four people were in earlier.

This time no candlelight showed him the way, so he took his lighter out of his trousers pocket. In the light of the small flame he found the way fast. When he reached the room, he lit a candle and looked around. The room was almost bare, only many candlesticks stood around and opposite the entrance, there was a table by the wall.

Pete walked up to it. On the table, he could see a green cloth covering a small object. Pete pulled the cloth away carefully and saw, by the light of the candle, the red stone glistening on a green velvet cushion. He hesitated for a moment, then reached for the stone, slipped it into his pocket and put the cloth back on the pillow. He was about to leave when he had an idea. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a tennis ball, which he carried around with him, as he had been trying to learn to juggle for some time. The ball was about the size of the stone and when he put it under the green cloth, there was no noticeable difference. He grinned contentedly, blew out the candle and made his way back. Now, he had to figure out a way to get out of the house right away.

“Why isn’t he answering?” Jupiter cursed quietly. Bob and he were still squatting behind the bushes watching the front door.

“Something must have happened to him. They’ve probably found him,” Bob murmured. “If only he hadn’t been so reckless! What do we do now?”

“We’ll wait another five minutes,” Jupiter said. “If he hasn’t called by then, then...” He stopped abruptly.

“Then what?” Bob wanted to know. “Shall we call the police?”

The First Investigator laughed bitterly. “The police? Then what? Are we going to tell the police that Pete broke into this house?”

“But who knows what they’ll do to him if they found him in there!” Bob exclaimed.

“Exactly. We don’t know that. Perhaps we could ring the door bell and see what happens.”

“Are you...” Bob began, then suddenly came a sound:

“Psst!”

Bob gave out a little yell.

“Cool it, Bob. It’s just me.”

“Pete! Where have you been,” Jupiter exclaimed when he suddenly saw the Second Investigator standing behind him.

“You know that. In there,” he replied and pointed to the house. “I’ll explain it to you in a minute. Let’s get out of here as fast as we can!”

“Never scare me like that again,” Bob groaned as they sneaked back to the road and then to the car. “I almost had a heart attack. Now tell us. What happened?”

Pete told them what he saw and did. “Then I climbed the basement stairs. Luckily, Stan and his guests went back into the meeting room. I didn’t want to go through the front door again because of the outdoor lighting.

So I just walked into another room and climbed out the window. But in retrospect, I am not so sure that it was a good idea to take the stone back. What I saw going on there... we could be dealing with a vicious cult! That’s what it seemed to me. The stone is tremendously important to those guys, they worship it, and I’d imagine they’ll go furiously wild when they realize it’s gone.”

“Fortunately, they don’t know who has it,” Jupiter remarked.

“Not yet. But that could change. What’s the deal with that stone and that weird sword?” Pete wondered. “They talked something about power, but what kind of power can a glass sword have? This doesn’t seem to make sense to me.”

“We’ll find out tomorrow...” the First Investigator decided. “... from Mr Whitehead.”

10. Mr Whitehead Reveals

Butler Ben opened the door for them again. Jupiter had expected to see him surprised, but his expressionless face could not tell whether he was surprised by The Three Investigators' return visit.

"We'd like to see Mr Whitehead," said the First Investigator. "Is he here?"

"I'll ask if he would be free to receive you," the butler replied coolly and disappeared into the house. A little later, he came back and let The Three Investigators in. "Mr Whitehead is waiting for you at the terrace again."

"I'm glad to see you again so soon. Hopefully you will bring me good news," he said after they greeted each other and taken their seats.

"It depends," Jupiter replied reservedly. "If you mean the assignment you gave us, then there's good news. We have the stone back."

Benjamin Whitehead looked up in surprise. "What?" he asked, glancing at the three boys as if searching them for the sought-after object. "Where is it? And from where?"

"You will have it," Jupiter promised, without answering his question. "Provided you tell us the whole story."

"I... don't quite understand," the white-haired man claimed, but all three noticed that he understood exactly what it was all about.

"You know more about the stone than you told us yesterday. It wasn't easy getting it back," Jupiter continued. "We wouldn't have done it without Pete. And what he has seen led us to assume that this piece of lead crystal is far more than just a harmless collector's kitsch. We want you to tell us what the stone means, why all sorts of people are after it—and what the whole thing has to do with a burning sword."

During these last words Jupiter watched the man very closely. It was obvious how his eyes widened for a short moment and he then tried to regain his composure. "Make no effort to deceive us, Mr Whitehead," the First Investigator said, boldly. "Your reaction yesterday was conspicuous enough."

The man looked at Jupiter helplessly for a moment, then he resignedly let his shoulders and head sink and sighed. "All right. I'll tell you the story... if you tell me what you know."

But Pete shook his head. "First it's your turn," he said firmly.

"All right." He sighed again and then drank a sip of water from the glass on the table. "As you know, I didn't know Billy Ford very well. We were acquaintances, but not friends. But once we had a little more to do with each other and one evening, after we had already drank a lot, he entrusted me with a secret. He told me about his time in the African state of Ndalú. He lived there for a while as an aid worker, but until a few days ago I had no idea that he took another name.

"Anyway, mysterious circumstances led him to the tracks of an uncanny union, a cult called 'Covenant of the Sword'. This cult worshipped a sword made of glass. Don't ask me why, I don't know the exact background. Anyway, the sword was especially important to them. It consists of three parts: a blade, a handle and the stone in the middle. But the sword was not assembled, and the cult was forbidden to act until they had assembled the sword."

“To act?” Pete asked. “What were their goals and why didn’t they just put the sword together?”

“I don’t know anything about their goals, Billy didn’t tell me anything about them,” Mr Whitehead continued. “But he was terrified of the cult. There had to be a dark secret behind it that made him turn pale as he told me the story. The cult probably expected some kind of power from the sword.

“But this power could only be activated when the sword was assembled at a certain moment. Then it would start to burn, so it’s called the burning sword. This right moment was when the day and night unite, as Billy told me anyway.”

The Three Investigators took a meaningful look at each other. This was exactly what Pete had overheard when he was in the basement of Stan’s house. “What’s the meaning of this?” Bob wanted to know.

“A solar eclipse,” Whitehead replied. “During a solar eclipse the moon moves in front of the sun and darkens it for a few minutes. This is the moment when day and night unite.”

“The solar eclipse!” cried Pete. “That’s in four days! That’s why these cult followers said yesterday that they only had four days left.” Mr Whitehead gave him a questioning look. The Second Investigator gestured to him that he would explain everything later.

“Billy Ford was in Ndalu in the sixties and in 1962, there was a solar eclipse there,” Mr Whitehead continued. “On this day the sword should be assembled.

“But Billy, who had got wind of it, managed to steal the sword—or more accurately, the individual parts. The cult was after him of course and Billy came back to California. But the members of the cult followed him and I suspect that he changed his name to remain undiscovered. Since then he guarded the parts of the burning sword in the hope that the cult would never get its hands on them again.”

“Why didn’t he just destroy the sword?” Pete asked.

“Billy told me that the sword would only lose its power if it were destroyed during a solar eclipse. Otherwise, an eternal curse would weigh on whomever touched it last. He longed for this next solar eclipse to finally complete his work, but unfortunately, he passed away a few weeks ago.”

“And he left you the sword,” Bob continued. “So that you can do it for him.”

Mr Whitehead kept quiet.

“But why did he play this hide-and-seek game with Uncle Titus and the other two heirs?” Pete asked. “It would have been much easier to send you the sword right away.”

Jupiter replied in Benjamin Whitehead’s place: “Because he suspected that after his death his true identity would become known. And that’s how it happened. He knew that the members of the cult were still nearby and wanted to prevent them from getting the sword. So he bequeathed each part separately to cover the tracks.”

Whitehead nodded. “That’s what I think he wanted to do. And that’s why I was so scared when I found out about the break-ins. Members of the Covenant are actually still somewhere here and are still searching for the sword. It’s incredibly important that they don’t find it before the eclipse.” Abruptly his voice became demanding: “But now tell me your story! How did you get the stone?”

The Three Investigators looked at each other. After an encouraging nudge from Juve, Pete told everything he had seen and heard in Stan’s house. When he reported their plan to have The Three Investigators watched, Mr Whitehead became restless.

“But... but if they’ve really been watching you, they’re probably at my door now!”

But Bob shook his head. “Certainly not. They didn’t even realize we were gone.”

Mr Whitehead frowned and Pete explained: “We met today at our headquarters, this is the trailer that serves as our office. If there were observers, they might have seen us go in, but not come out. That’s because we used a hidden passage to leave without being seen.”

The hidden passage Pete referred to was one that went underground from under the trailer to the covered workshop of the salvage yard. From there, they took another path that led directly out the fence.

Mr Whitehead breathed a sigh of relief. “I don’t know how far these people would go, but the fact that they followed Billy Ford from Africa to America after so many years just to get the sword proves that they’ll stop at nothing. Billy knew that. He even changed his identity just to be safe from them.

“The solar eclipse is imminent. I don’t want to know what happens when the cult gets their hands on the burning sword. That’s why I didn’t tell you the whole story yesterday. I hope you can forgive me for that.”

Jupiter nodded. “Now we know the circumstances, as promised, we’ll give you back the stone.” With that, he took out a bag and brought out the stone that was wrapped in a cloth. He handed it to Mr Whitehead, who took and unwrapped the cloth to reveal the shiny red stone. He looked at it admiringly.

“Now that you have the stone back, please hide it well—just like the blade and the handle,” Jupiter added. “Or better yet, destroy the sword!”

Mr Whitehead looked at the First Investigator helplessly. “I know it sounds silly. Actually, I don’t believe in dark powers and magic and things like that. But Billy spoke at that time with such forcefulness that I better follow his advice and destroy the sword only during the solar eclipse. I don’t want to draw a curse on me.” He laughed. “You must think I’m a superstitious idiot. But if you heard Billy back then, you’d probably think alike. Fear showed in his eyes when he told me the burning sword, its power and its curse. I’ll wait another four days to destroy it.”

Jupiter suddenly turned around. He looked to the opened door to the terrace. Then he stood up abruptly, went over and closed the door. He returned and looked seriously at the astonished Mr Whitehead. “Mr Whitehead,” he asked, “Can you trust Ben?”

“Ben? Why do you ask?”

“Pete noticed yesterday that he was apparently overhearing our conversation.”

Benjamin Whitehead laughed. “Ben? All right, admittedly, he’s a little curious. But I’m sure I can trust him. Even if he overheard us—which I don’t necessarily believe—what danger should that pose?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Jupiter. “But the fewer people know about the burning sword, the better it is for you right now. Does Ben know about the story?”

Whitehead shook his head. “I didn’t tell him anything. You know, Ben has been with me for several years, but he only comes in the evenings and on weekends. I’m at the office during the day anyway, so I don’t need him. During this time, there hasn’t been much contact, so Ben knows very little about me and my life.”

“All the better. I suggest that you should take care that he doesn’t get more information than necessary,” Jupiter suggested, then he rose. “We have to go now.”

Mr Whitehead escorted them to the door. “I thank you once again for finding the stone for me and for putting yourselves in danger. I would like to express my gratitude to you three.”

“That’s not necessary, Mr Whitehead,” Jupiter replied. “After all, what we did was to carry out my uncle’s task and bring you the stone.”

“Say hello to your uncle for me, Jupiter. Goodbye.”

The Three Investigators went to their bicycles, Pete turned to the house once more and saw a shadow behind the curtain of a window on the upper floor. "There he is again," he said, "... that butler. I had the feeling again today that he was listening to us."

Bob nodded. "Yes, it also seemed to me that we were not alone. This whole thing remains mysterious."

"What do you mean?" Pete wanted to know.

"Well, this case is kind of unsolved," Bob replied. "We have given the stone to Mr Whitehead, but so many questions remain. This mysterious cult—I'm not quite sure yet. And we still don't know who gave us the anonymous tip yesterday where to find the stone. And finally, there's Ben, the butler I don't trust."

Jupiter nodded. "You're right. The case isn't closed for me yet. We should definitely check on what Whitehead told us. I would like to find out more about the burning sword and the Covenant of the Sword. Bob, do you think you can do some research?"

Bob used to work at Rocky Beach City Library on a temporary basis before getting the job at Sax Sendler's music agency. Since he was responsible for research anyway, he nodded enthusiastically, because he was still fascinated to spend hours in old books digging up information. "Sure. I'll get to work tomorrow after school."

11. Bob's Findings

The next day Bob kept his promise and drove straight to the library after school. Miss Bennett, the librarian, smiled at him with pleasure when she saw him. "Bob! I'm glad you're showing your face here again. You're picking out a little leisure reading? Or something for school? Or are you and your friends on a hot case again?" She winked at him playfully.

"More like the latter," Bob replied. "Although we don't quite know if it is really a case at the moment."

"What are you looking for?" Miss Bennett asked, but then she shook her head and smiled apologetically at him. "Oh well, you know your way around here as well as I do. You'll find what you're looking for, won't you?"

"I think so too," Bob replied and then walked through the rows of bookshelves. At the back of the library was the computer. Bob sat down at the screen and entered the keyword 'cult'. The program, which had itemized all borrowable books, immediately spat out the titles in question. Bob wrote down the call numbers and then wandered along the shelves to find the books.

With a stack of about a dozen books, he sat down at a table and started leafing through them. He looked in the indexes for 'Covenant of the Sword', but only in one book did he find what he was looking for. Here was a whole chapter about this cult. Before Bob read the chapter, he took a look at the cover. The author was Dr Ken Wright and the book was entitled 'The Belief in the Unbelievable—Cults and their Stories'. Then he scanned the short biography of the author.

Suddenly Bob stood up, brought all the other books back to the shelves and went to borrow that one particular book.

"Already done?" Miss Bennett asked in surprise as she received Bob's library card and loaned out the book in his name.

"Yes. Instead of just reading this book, I'd visit the author."

The rickety Beetle rolled over the roads of the Santa Monica Mountains. Bob drove in the direction of Los Angeles, more precisely to a university on the outskirts of the city. He had read that the author of the book, Dr Ken Wright, taught there and so it was only natural for Bob to go directly to him, especially when there is not much time till the solar eclipse. After all, he seemed to be an expert on the Covenant of the Sword. At red traffic lights he skimmed over the chapter quickly and at the huge parking lot of the university, he quickly read the chapter completely.

It took him a long time to find his way around the huge campus of the university. After a long search and wandering in the many buildings where students and professors walked around, he finally stood in front of the office of Dr Wright, a professor of anthropology, as he had found out by then.

He was lucky, because Dr Wright was in his office and even had time for him. He invited him in and Bob took a seat on the other side of his desk. At that moment, the phone rang and Dr Wright talked to someone for a while, so Bob had enough time to take a closer look at the room and the person opposite him.

The small office on the fourth floor overlooking the campus had many metal shelves filled with files and books. There was admirable order on the desk. Dr Wright was a big bald man. Only a white wreath of hair was left, but he wore a dense, white full beard. That's exactly what Bob thought a male professor at the university would look like. But there was something about him that made Bob suspicious. He felt as if he had seen this man before. He probably mistook him for an actor, but before he got around to thinking about it, Dr Wright ended his phone call and turned to him.

"What can I do for you? Is it about a job?"

Bob shook his head. "No, I'm not at university at all. I was just hoping to find you here because I discovered a book of yours and would like to know more about it." He held the library book towards him.

Dr Wright smiled. "It's been some time since I wrote that. What exactly are you interested in?"

"I am particularly interested in the Covenant of the Sword."

"Do you need this for school?" asked Dr Wright and it seemed he wasn't at all surprised by Bob's interest.

Bob almost nodded, but then he felt that such a specific topic of interest for a school project might not sound very realistic. Instead, he replied, "No, it's more of a private interest." He hoped Dr Wright wouldn't ask any more questions.

In fact, the man was contented. "What exactly do you want to know?"

"Can you tell me anything about the history of the cult?" Bob asked.

"Well, not much is known about the origins of the cult. It probably originated when the first Europeans with belligerent intentions invaded West Africa and encountered a culture that was completely foreign to them. They were confronted for the first time with the natives' belief in supernatural powers. In the course of time they integrated the legends of the African people into their own culture and through this some of the old stories were reinterpreted. This was how the legend of the burning sword came about. This sword supposedly once belonged to two gods, a pair of twins. One was the ruler of the day, the other watched over the night.

"According to legend, the gods were mortal. At one later point in time, the twins put all their power into the sword and then took it apart so that no one could use it—I mean, get and use the power. But in the future, if a person were to assemble the sword back at the very moment when day and night unite, then the power of the burning sword would be available to that person."

"When day and night unite," Bob asked. "What does that mean?"

"That's how the legend described a solar eclipse," Dr Wright explained. "I'll get to that in a minute. The sword actually exists and nobody knows where it came from or who made it. It appeared at some point in the African state of Ndalu, which was still under European rule at that time. The followers of the cult worshipped this weapon, for them it was a symbol of power.

"But in 1960, Ndalu gained independence and the Covenant of the Sword went from a harmless little religion to a racist cult. The members were almost exclusively whites and they believed they could regain Ndalu if they had the power of the burning sword. Many of them had high political positions and planned a renewed oppression of the native Africans in Ndalu.

"The cult waited for the next solar eclipse, when day and night unite, to take place in July 1962. But shortly before that, the sword suddenly disappeared. Allegedly, a former cult member who had turned his back on this ideology had stolen it. The Covenant then dissolved

as there was no longer a firm commitment to the faith. Only a few incorrigible ones followed the thief of the sword to California, among them was the then leader of the cult.

“However, this leader died shortly thereafter and their religious law stated that only the one who possessed and united the burning sword could become the new leader of the cult. Now that both the sword had disappeared and the leader had died, the cult had nothing to hold on to, and it became very quiet.”

“Does this mean that the cult has disbanded?” Bob wanted to know.

“This was believed by many until the cult made a name for itself again in this area in the late sixties, but after that, the members supposedly disappeared from the scene. So for a long while, there has been no sign of the members from that time, whether they still exist today, or whether they have quietly recruited a new generation of cult followers.”

Bob took a deep breath. That was a lot of information he had to digest first. “The burning sword,” he finally said, “did it really have magical powers? And why should it burn when it’s assembled during a solar eclipse?”

“Magical powers... perhaps not in the conventional sense. But faith is also a kind of magic because it causes people to do things that they would never do without this faith. Many wars have been waged in the name of different gods and religions and for some people, faith was motivation enough to kill other people for it. It’s a kind of magic, albeit a very dark and frightening one. But the people in the background, the rulers and politicians, see the whole thing much more soberly. They use this faith to manipulate the people. What they do not achieve through their politics, for example, to find a reason to wage war, they achieve through the religious faith of the people.”

“And what were the aims of the Covenant of the Sword?” Bob asked. “Was it still about the politics in Ndalú after the cult members came here, to California? Or are there other purposes?”

“That’s hard to say,” said Dr Wright. “I personally believe that the Covenant had a leader who was concerned with things quite different from the sword and its power. This leader wanted political and economic influence and used his disciples to achieve both. Because that’s what every kind of cult is all about: The people in the background want money and power.

“Religion is only a means to an end. They use it to lure people to serve them and with that they can expand their position of power. Even a completely worthless glass object like the burning sword can thus become a frightening instrument of power—especially when there are people who, in the name of the sword, are willing to serve their leader unconditionally.”

“But if this leader doesn’t exist anymore,” Bob said. “then there’s no one left to abuse the faith of the cult followers.”

“That’s not quite right. At the Covenant of the Sword, there is a strict hierarchy. Besides the untouchable ruler, whom all must follow, there is still the so-called Keeper. He is the guardian of ancient secret documents and mystical writings that accurately record their religious laws. The Keeper also acts as a sort of deputy for the leader. So there would be someone else who could abuse the faith of the cult.”

Bob nodded. “And if the sword should reappear,” he continued cautiously, “and it is actually assembled at the next eclipse, what would happen then? It wouldn’t really burn, would it?”

Dr Wright put his fingertips together. “It would appear to burn.” He smiled. “As far as I know, the sword is made of a very elaborate lead crystal. When all three parts are put together, the crystal stone in the middle refracts the sunlight so that the light is transmitted to

the blade. The glass blade begins to glow and then it will look as if the sword is actually burning or at least glowing.”

“And if that happens? What would be the consequences for the cult?”

“Well, the one who assembles the sword will be the new leader of the cult, according to the laws. If it is a highly-respected cult member, then as a recognised ruler he or she would be able to influence all other cult members. This can be very dangerous, because often these members have important political or economic positions and if they give their power to the ruler, then he or she would be able to build a vicious racist system.”

“What does that mean?” Bob asked.

“In plain language, if the sword is assembled and the new leader of the cult orders his subjects to do something about the minorities, may it be Africans, Jews, foreigners or even homosexuals, then they could succeed. If the subjects come from many different aspects of life, then the cult would have the opportunity to do or influence something on a large scale. For example, if one of them is the owner of a large company, he could dismiss all his foreign employees. And if one of them is a person of high political power, well, I think you’d get the picture...”

“They will not change things overnight, otherwise it would become very obvious. Instead, things will happen subtly and eventually they could achieve their goals.”

“But...” Bob began, feeling faint at the idea, “but these people can’t be that stupid! They must be able to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. How can they just blindly follow a leader?”

A bitter smile scurried over Dr Wright’s face. “Unfortunately, people are often very stupid, my friend. That’s the sad part. Because of their faith, they are very easy to influence. It just needs someone to be in the right position to take advantage of other people’s inner convictions. That can happen very quickly. But faith in a particular cause must never justify the oppression of minorities. Or worse...”

Bob shivered as he imagined what could happen if a fanatic gained too much power and the cult followers blindly followed him. Those who disagreed would not be safe. “What could be worse?” he asked.

“I was just talking about the sensation the cult caused here in California in the sixties. There was a death at the time. A cult member turned out to be an infiltrator. The man had crept into the cult in order to render it harmless from within and to break up the rigid structures. But he was discovered by the others and his cover was blown. He killed himself for fear of the members’ revenge. This case went to the press at that time and it created a lot of fuss. Then the cult became quiet. They probably became more cautious and preferred to continue working underground. Many believed at that time that the cult had disintegrated, but I am convinced that they are still somewhere near here and that they are still searching for the burning sword. They don’t have a leader and the sword, so they are still relatively harmless.

“But once they get the sword back and appoint a leader, they can be very dangerous... for all of us.” Dr Wright looked at Bob with a forceful look, but then his face relaxed and he smiled cheerfully.

“But hopefully it will never come to that, because the sword has been lost for decades and probably it will stay that way and the cult will never get its hands on it again.”

Bob swallowed and an icy shiver ran through his body. Dr Wright may have been reassured by this thought, but Bob knew better. “Maybe it was destroyed,” Bob said. “Wouldn’t that be best?”

Wright pulled out his face. “Maybe. But on the other hand, the destruction of the sword could also have unforeseen consequences and bring about revenge by the cult members. If

they find out it has been destroyed, then... well, no one can foresee what will happen. But it does not necessarily have to be for the best.

“But, tell me, your interest in this story is unusually high. I hope you don’t have more to do with this than mere interest.” That sounded more like a wish than a question, Bob thought.

“What? Uh, no, of course not. What do you mean?” Bob echoed in his mind for that stuttering response. But what he had just learned had made him very insecure and terrified.

“It was just a thought,” Dr Wright said appeasingly. “Be that as it may, if you ever have anything to do with the Covenant of the Sword—or any other cult, no matter which one—leave it alone! I can only emphasize that. These people are not to be messed with. For their faith—and for their leader—they are capable of anything.”

Bob just nodded. He had a big lump in his throat and he couldn’t say a word. His only thoughts were now with Jupe and Pete—and not least, Benjamin Whitehead, whom they absolutely had to warn. Probably he knew nothing at all about the danger in which he was in as long as the burning sword was in his possession.

“I think I have to go now,” Bob said. “Thank you for all the information. That was very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome. I must now also go to give a lecture.” Dr Wright rose from his chair and Bob said goodbye to him.

On his way back through the huge university complex, dark premonitions crept up on him again and again, which he could not get rid of.

The day after tomorrow was the solar eclipse.

12. A Clear Warning

“After I was with Dr Wright, I walked around the university a little and happened to meet Professor Olafson, a friend of my father. He teaches physics and astronomy. I checked with him the solar eclipse in Ndalú in the sixties. Everything Wright told me was true,” Bob told his friends when they met at Headquarters that afternoon.

“Professor Olafson also told me that the upcoming solar eclipse viewed from Rocky Beach is only 98 percent complete,” Bob continued. “The moon covers the sun completely a few miles further northeast. But that’s just by the way. When I drove back to Rocky Beach...” He faltered, and his hands were nervously playing at the hem of his T-shirt. “I always felt like I was being watched or followed.”

“Did you see anyone?” Jupiter asked. “Was somebody after you?”

Bob shook his head. “Not that I am aware of. I kept staring into the rearview mirror, but I didn’t notice anything. It was just a feeling, but to be honest, I still have it now. Ever since Dr Wright told me the story about the Covenant of the Sword, I’ve become more and more convinced that this time we’re dealing with a case that’s a couple of sizes too big for us.”

“I agree,” Pete agreed. “I never thought we were on to such a scary thing. Cults, murder and manslaughter! It’s a good thing we’ve satisfied Uncle Titus as a client, so we can stay out of this now.”

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating?” said Jupiter. “At least, there is no murder or manslaughter yet.”

“And what about the guy who killed himself because he was afraid of the cult’s revenge? For me, this falls under the category of murder and manslaughter,” Pete enthused. “Besides, you haven’t see those guys in that basement. They were real fanatics, who knows what they’re up to!” Then he got very serious: “Why am I getting the impression that you’re up to something again, Juve?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Jupiter replied.

“You seem so strangely calm. This is always the case when you have a plan at the back of your mind that you don’t want to share with us yet,” Pete said. “You’re not going to do this again, are you?”

“Stay tuned...” Jupiter mumbled. “There’s nothing to hang on to. I don’t think we can just pull ourselves out of this now. The day after tomorrow is the solar eclipse. There are only two days left, but who knows what this cult can do until then. We should definitely warn Mr Whitehead. It is best that he destroys the sword immediately.”

“What about the curse?” Pete threw in.

“There’s no such thing as a curse,” Jupiter replied with some irritation.

“But Dr Wright said it wouldn’t be wise to destroy the burning sword,” Bob said. “Benjamin Whitehead may be putting himself in unnecessary danger. If the cult ever finds out that he had the sword in his possession and then had it destroyed, it could be his turn to face a revenge.”

“But then there’s no solution to the problem at all,” the Second Investigator remarked. “Firstly, you can’t let the cult have the sword. Secondly, you can’t destroy it for fear of

revenge. Thirdly, you can't keep it else you spend the rest of your life in fear and terror. So perhaps you have to hide the sword somehow, so no one would ever find it."

"We definitely have to talk to Mr Whitehead about this," Jupiter decided, bobbing in his desk chair. "He urgently needs to be informed of the kind of dangerous object he has lying around his house. I'd better call him right now." Jupiter dialled the number, but all he got was Whitehead's answering machine.

Jupiter then made a request on the machine that he should call him back urgently when he got home.

"After that, we'll stay away from this, okay?" Pete asked expectantly, after the First Investigator had hung up the phone. "These religious fanatics are really a bit too violent for me. Who knows what they're capable of. My encounter with them at that obscure gathering was actually enough for me for the rest of my life. I still can't believe it. Why are these people manipulated like that? From a piece of lead crystal and an arbitrary human being who puts it together like a puzzle? That's not in my head."

Bob and Jupiter sighed helplessly. They, too, did not know the answer. Finally Jupiter said: "Don't we all like to be influenced? I mean, can we still make a clear distinction these days between what decisions we consciously make alone and what decisions we allow ourselves to be influenced by?"

"I make all my decisions myself," Pete gave back.

"Are you so sure about that?" Jupe asked. "What do you do, for example, when you want to buy new sneakers? You will be influenced by advertising, by the brand that is currently 'in', and probably by the one most often worn at school. Or when you go to the movies with Kelly, you are influenced by the movie reviews from the newspapers and television in your decision as to which movie to watch. Or just look at the three of us: We don't always agree, do we? And when we talk about a problem, we constantly influence each other."

Bob grinned. "Yes, mostly in your favour and at our expense."

"All I'm saying is, maybe it's very similar in a cult," Jupiter continued. "People may not even be aware that they're being manipulated. They believe in the burning sword, for whatever reason, and are willing to do anything for it."

"But they are adults, intelligent people," Pete replied annoyingly. "How can they fall for such superstitions and then act so inhumanely? It is completely illogical to worship a glass sword! There's nothing behind it!"

"Who said it was logical?" asked Jupiter. "Faith is always illogical. Look at the great religions of the world. Whether Hindus or Christians or Muslims or Buddhists, they all basically believe in unprovable and thus illogical causes."

"Even if such causes are unprovable, illogical or unreasonable today, does not mean that they should be dismissed because one day, we might be able to prove it or see it as logical and reasonable," Bob said.

"Okay, you have a point there, Bob," Jupe admitted. "But you can see now is that faith in religion is more powerful than the religion itself."

"Maybe so," Pete admitted. "But what is this faith? What are the people who join the cult about? It's not about politics in Ndalun anymore. But what then? How does a man get the idea to follow the Covenant of the Sword?"

"Like many religions, the Covenant promises to give its followers the answer to their questions about the meaning of life," Bob explained. "People are always looking for answers to the questions such as belief in the divine, life after death and how they should lead their lives best. Religion can be a great help because it provides answers—it doesn't matter

whether the answers are logical or illogical, provable or improvable. And as soon as someone—for whatever reason—takes a liking to a certain world view, he or she can be manipulable.”

“The meaning of life!” Pete blew his cheeks open and let the air out noisily. “This is all too philosophical for me,” he added. “I think the whole thing is pretty scary, anyway.”

“The bad thing is that these people actually have the power to enforce their wishes, or the wishes of their leader,” Bob remarked. “Dr Wright said that many of the members are in senior positions and can achieve a lot from there. It can get really scary.”

“You said it,” Pete agreed with him. “That’s why we have to keep our hands off it. We’re not up to it.”

“But we can’t stand idly by either,” Jupiter said. “After all, we know what the consequences can be if the sword falls into the wrong hands. We have to do something about it.”

“Wrong. Benjamin Whitehead needs to do something about it, not us,” Pete argued. “All we can do is inform him. He’ll have to take care of everything else himself. Luckily, it’s only two days left. When the solar eclipse is over, the danger is averted—at least for the next few years or decades, until the next eclipse.”

“I hope you’re right,” Bob replied. “Think of the butler, Ben. Mr Whitehead was convinced that he is harmless, but do you believe that? I don’t. I’m afraid the situation won’t just end even if we warn Mr Whitehead.”

There was a long silence at Headquarters. Jupiter, Pete and Bob thought about the future that could lie ahead of them if the Covenant of the Sword came to power. And they all had the same oppressive feeling of powerlessness, because they could do nothing in the face of these opponents.

Previously they had only dealt with individual crimes and an opponent who had to be defeated. But this situation was completely different. There was no tangible crime, at least not yet. And there was no single opponent, but a whole group, of which they didn’t even know how big it was. They couldn’t go to Chief Reynolds, because what were they supposed to show or tell him? A few break-ins, most of which didn’t even had anything stolen, except for the two thefts of the red stone—one of which was committed by Pete. The assembly at Stan’s house, which Pete had observed, had neither been forbidden nor were there any concrete indications of future criminal actions.

The Three Investigators were sitting around empty-handed. This worried them all the more after the story Bob had learned from the university professor.

Suddenly the phone rang. All three of them came together shocked as the loud ringing broke the silence and ripped them from their thoughts. Jupiter took a deep breath once and waited for the second ring. “Hopefully that’s Mr Whitehead,” he said. Then he turned on the loudspeaker and picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking.”

A dark, rough voice came out from the loudspeaker. It said only one sentence, but that was enough to make all three of them shiver.

“Don’t ever get in our way again!”

13. The Inconsiderate Mr Whitehead

Jupiter stared at the receiver for a long time, even after the connection had long since been broken. His hand trembled slightly when he finally put the phone down.

"They're after us!" whispered Pete. "What are we gonna do now?"

"Don't get in their way again," Bob replied. "That's very clear. Jupe?"

The First Investigator nodded. "We'll talk to Mr Whitehead again, and then we'll do nothing." The horror was also written in his face, which was rare. "Hopefully he'll be in touch soon."

But for the rest of the day, they did not get any calls from Whitehead.

Bob and Pete drove home. Jupiter just had to walk across the salvage yard to get home safely, while his two friends were probably constantly haunted by the thought of being watched from every angle.

When Jupiter was lying in bed, his thoughts long continued to revolve around the Covenant of the Sword, cults and fanatics, and his powerlessness in the face of this situation. He didn't sleep very well.

The Three Investigators met the next day after school at Headquarters. Pete came in last. "I've been thinking long and hard, guys. I suggest we notify Chief Reynolds."

"So? And what should we tell him?" asked Jupiter, who just bit into an apple. "You know we don't have any proof. Against what? There wasn't even a crime."

"Yes, there was," Pete disagreed. "Several even. From my last count, there were at least five break-ins: at Ford's house, the notary's, Mrs Hanson's, at your house, and at Headquarters."

"That's really not many, Pete," Jupe said, "One correction though, there were at least six break-ins—count the one you did when you got the stone back! The red stone was stolen twice!"

"Well, listen, just say that that wasn't in your interest," Pete hit back.

"I'm not saying that," Jupe consoled him. "But this Stan could make things difficult for us. After all, we are guilty of a crime, that's for sure."

"But he doesn't know that. I mean, he doesn't know who stole the stone," Pete argued.

The First Investigator bit his apple again. "Yes, but look at it this way. We have no evidence that the cult has anything to do with the break-ins. However, we have given the stone back to Mr Whitehead, and if there was an enquiry, he would have to reveal that it was us who gave him the stone. With or without our admission, that is enough evidence that we broke into Stan's house."

"But Reynolds will turn a blind eye," Pete believed. "After all, we've done this before and we've never gotten in trouble."

"True, but so far such actions have always served to solve a case," Jupiter said. "All we have now would be the break-in here at Headquarters. Not exactly a huge crime."

"And what about the break-in at the notary's?" Bob interjected, who had listened silently so far. "The theft of important documents may weigh a little heavier."

"Yes, but we can't prove who did it," Jupiter replied.

"If the police searched Stan's house, they might find the documents there..." Pete said.

Jupiter sighed. "Unlikely. Look, they only needed the names and addresses of the three heirs, and after they got that, they probably disposed of the documents. And even if the police finds the documents, what would be gained from this? I don't think that can get Stan and his people behind bars for years. They'll probably get away with just a fine."

But the Second Investigator waved off. "That's not the point. It's about stopping this cult. The eclipse is tomorrow. If we tell Reynolds about everything, he might be able to get Stan and his people incapacitated for twenty-four hours. That would be enough."

"In that sense, I believe Pete's right," Bob agreed. "When the solar eclipse is over tomorrow, we can breathe a sigh of relief and forget about it—at least for the next few decades. But by tomorrow, we should do everything we can to thwart the cult's plan to assemble the sword."

Jupiter looked at them seriously. "Have you ever thought about what will happen if the cult finds out that we got the police on their heels? I mean, what will happen to us then?"

Suddenly silence prevailed in Headquarters and Pete and Bob looked at Jupiter in horror. In the middle of this silence, the telephone rang and all three flinched.

Jupiter stared at his friends and knew that they were all thinking of the same thing. But then he pulled himself together, switched on the loudspeaker and picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones speaking," he said in a croaking voice.

"Hello, Jupiter, this is Benjamin Whitehead." The Three Investigators breathed a sigh of relief. "You called me? I came back from the office very late last night, so I couldn't get back to you. What is this about?"

"Mr Whitehead, thank you for returning my call. We really need to talk to you. It's about the burning sword. Bob has found out more about the cult that you should know."

"What is it?" Whitehead asked.

"Not on the phone," Jupiter said. "Can we come to your place?"

"Come here? Well, that's not so convenient right now..."

"Please, Mr Whitehead," Jupiter interrupted him. "It's really urgent. You're in danger. We need to talk to you—as soon as possible!"

For a while, it was quiet at the other end. Then Whitehead sighed. "All right. Right now I'm at the office. But you can come by tonight. Eight o'clock? But don't let anyone follow you."

"You can count on that."

"So, guys, what exactly is this about?" Whitehead had welcomed them back on the terrace, but this time he wasn't as friendly and courteous as on their last two visits. On the contrary, he seemed very irritated.

He smoked his pipe restlessly. Jupiter blamed his nervousness probably on the fact that he had just came back from his office.

Ben had brought them something to drink and Jupiter watched him secretly, but the butler was completely inconspicuous. And now they were sitting in the cool evening air watching the sunset over the Santa Monica Mountains.

"You must destroy the burning sword," said Jupiter. "It's incredibly important that no one ever gets their hands on it again. Never again."

"But that's exactly what I'm planning to do tomorrow," Whitehead replied.

"Better you do it now," Pete said. "Bob found out from a university lecturer some information about the cult that you should know."

Now Bob took the floor and told Whitehead everything Dr Wright told him about the Covenant of the Sword. The eyes of the host widened as Bob went on more and more. When he finished, Benjamin Whitehead looked very frightened.

"I didn't know that this cult was so dangerous," he confessed, "how could Billy bequeath the burning sword to me? He must have known the danger I could be in."

"Would you destroy it? I mean, right now?" Jupiter asked.

Whitehead sighed. "After all that you know now, I can understand that this is very urgent from your perspective. But I have told you that the sword must be destroyed only during the eclipse."

"But you don't really take that seriously, do you?" Bob exclaimed. "The sword itself has no power, nor can it bear any curse. It's the people who make it such a powerful tool."

"That's what you're saying," Whitehead disagreed. "But would you destroy the sword now if you were me?"

Bob kept quiet to think about it, nervously playing with his car key he was holding in his hand. Mr Whitehead interpreted silence as negation. "You see. Your head tells you it's for the best, but you wouldn't have a good feeling about it."

"I didn't say that," Bob defended himself. "Of course, there would be a risk. But the risk does not come from the sword, but from the cult followers. And that's why you should destroy it as soon as possible. Because once it is destroyed, no one knows you once had it. It's the best way to avoid trouble with the cult."

Ben came onto the terrace and the conversation was interrupted. "Do you still need me, Mr Whitehead?" he asked stiffly.

"No, Ben, thank you. You can go home," Whitehead said wearily.

"Thank you, sir. Good evening, sir. Goodbye." He went back into the house and a few moments later they heard the front door close.

"You didn't hear Billy then," Whitehead resumed the conversation. "He was so afraid of the cult and the sword, and he kept stressing that he didn't dare to just make it go away. He must have had a reason, don't you think? I myself do not know exactly what the reason is, but I will be careful not to act differently from he would have done. Not to mention, there are not even twenty-four hours left until the solar eclipse. What else could happen in this time? I promise you I'll destroy it then."

Mr Whitehead had sounded very determined and the First Investigator noticed that it made little sense to keep talking to him. His decision seemed to be final.

"Is the sword safe, at least?" Jupiter asked.

"If you're asking if it's safe from being stolen, yes," Whitehead replied. "The house has an alarm system that I'll set as soon as you've left."

"All right, Mr Whitehead. Then we'll leave. Do you already know what exactly you will do tomorrow?" Jupiter asked when he rose from his chair.

"I will render the sword harmless," Whitehead replied mysteriously. "But the fewer people know about it, the better it is for all of us. We will agree on that, won't we?"

"Very well, Mr Whitehead," Jupiter replied coolly. Actually, he was angry and tried not to let anything show. Whitehead had been unusually gruff, although he should have been grateful for the information. And now he had neither listened to their advice nor did he want to tell them what he was going to do the next day.

The host accompanied his guests to the door. Halfway along the way Bob remembered: "Oh, I left my car key on the garden table. I'll get it quick!" He went back to the terrace one more time.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

“Who’s that now?” Mr Whitehead murmured. “Probably Ben, he forgets something sometimes.”

He opened the door. Jupiter and Pete were still standing in the hallway and could see two men in dark suits over Whitehead’s shoulder.

“Are you Mr Whitehead?” one of them asked.

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“May we come in for a moment?”

Pete pushed Jupiter’s elbows into his ribs and whispered: “The voice! I recognize it! From Stan’s house!”

Jupiter thought feverishly while Mr Whitehead said: “What’s this all about?”

“This is what it’s about!” The man suddenly pulled a revolver out of his pocket and pointed it at Whitehead. “Get back in the house, quick! And don’t make a sound!” He pushed Whitehead rudely back into the hallway and barged in. The second man followed in.

Pete whirled around and ran towards the terrace door.

“Don’t move, you there! I have a gun,” he heard a sharp voice behind him at that moment. Then the characteristic click of a revolver sounded. Pete stopped dead in his tracks. He slowly turned around and looked straight at a second revolver!

14. Trapped!

Bob had just returned from the terrace and had observed everything from the living room. He was afraid to be discovered, so he crept into the hallway and squeezed himself lightning fast through the frame of the nearest door.

The door swung inwards a bit. He slipped into the room, swung the door to leave a narrow gap, and listened through it. There were a loud babble of voices but it was not clear to him at first. Then he finally heard individual people speak. They were now standing near the door in the hallway.

"Come on, up against the wall. You too, boy! And don't move!"

"But, sir, we..." That was Jupiter.

"Shut up!"

"Leave the boys alone, they're just my guests," Mr Whitehead began in a trembling voice.

"Where is the third one of you?" asked the strange voice. "I know that there are three of you!"

"How do you know that?" Pete asked.

"You know exactly how we know that, boy! You think we're stupid, don't you? We know who you are, and you know who we are. But you weren't smart enough. Thought you'd come here unnoticed, huh? So, out with it, where's the third one?"

"He's not here," lied Jupiter and Bob breathed a sigh of relief in his hiding place. "He had a date with his girlfriend." For a while there was silence, then the voice said: "All right. We're here for another reason. We want the burning sword. Where is it?"

"What sword?" Whitehead asked.

"Don't even try to lead us astray! You know exactly what sword we mean. If you didn't know it from the beginning, these curious guys must have told you. So... where is it?"

"It's not here," Whitehead replied. "I've taken it to a safe place."

"And where is that?" the other man wanted to know. But Whitehead didn't answer. "Come on, say it, where is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you. And you don't have to threaten me, you can't get it out of me."

Again there was silence again. Then the first man said: "Go, search the house, I'll stay with our nice hosts."

Bob's heart pounded so loud that he thought it would be heard all the way down the hall. The intruder was going to search the house! Bob looked around in a flash. He was in the study where he had been before. The sword was in the same place—on the desk, this time complete with the stone, only that it was not assembled. The room offered no hiding place. The two windows were barred. There was only the door to the hall and one of the intruders was there. It was only a matter of time before the other would search the study.

Bob was trapped!

Jupiter's brain was running at full speed. At that moment he stood between Pete and Mr Whitehead in the hallway and he dared not move. The revolver of the dark-haired man standing in front of them wandered from one to the other and his sharp blue eyes were not for

a moment careless. But Jupiter's thoughts were not about escape. He was wondering where Bob was.

Bob had been on the terrace. Had he escaped through the garden and perhaps already on his way to a phone booth to call Chief Reynolds? Then maybe they could be freed soon. Or was he stuck here somewhere in the house?

The blond man was slowly searching room by room. The First Investigator could see through the doors as he ripped open the closets and drawers to look for the burning sword, and Jupiter expected at any moment to discover Bob if he was somewhere there.

Now the blond man went over to the study. Hopefully Whitehead wasn't just bluffing when he said the sword was in a safe place. The man pushed open the door.

"Here!" he cried, and Jupe's heart stopped for a moment. "Here is the sword!"

The man who was guarding them smiled contentedly. "There you go. Your place wasn't very safe, Mr Whitehead."

Whitehead slumped down a bit.

"That's what we wanted," the dark-haired man said.

The blond man came back. On his arms he carried the green velvet cushion, on which laid the glass blade, the elaborately decorated handle and in the middle, the red glowing stone. "And what do we do with the three of them?" he asked his partner. "Shall we leave them here?"

The other thought for a moment. "Too risky," he said. "It's best we take them with us. Come on, let's tie them up!"

Pete's arms were turned on his back and tied together with a telephone cable. The same thing was did to Jupiter and Mr Whitehead.

"Now we're good to go," said the dark-haired man. "There's a van in front of the house. You'll get in the back. You don't do anything on the way there, understand? Because I'll always be behind you with the gun."

"Where are you taking us?" Jupiter asked.

"To the place where day and night unite," the man replied mysteriously.

"Do you mean the solar eclipse?" Jupiter asked. "But it's going to happen here, too. Where exactly do you want to go?"

The blond man laughed. "You'll find out," he said. "Come on, go!"

The dark-haired man took the cushion with the sword parts and went ahead, then came Mr Whitehead, Jupe and Pete. The blond man went last. They got out of the house and into a dark blue van. There was no one on the street. Jupe saw Bob's bright yellow Beetle on the side of the road, so he hadn't left.

The three were pushed into the back, the door locked, and the two men got in the front. Through a small hatch they could watch their prisoners. The van started and then they rolled down the street.

Jupiter stood up a little and could see out through the small windows on the side. Mr Whitehead's house disappeared behind them. There were no leads from the police or Bob.

When Bob had heard the footsteps coming straight to the study, he had staggered back in fear, bumping against a bookshelf. He had half expected some books to fall out and betray him, but instead, he heard a soft click and the lower part of the bookshelf swung back like a door and opened into the wall behind it. Despite his surprise, Bob only hesitated for a moment before he realized that he had triggered off a secret door. He had no time to think, but quickly stepped through the secret door and closed it. It clicked quietly into place.

He listened in the darkness and heard one of the men shout out that he had found the sword. Bob bit his lip in annoyance for not taking the sword parts with him. With a throbbing heart, he put his ear to the swinging door. But now he heard nothing more than the rush of his own blood to his ears.

Bob stood there for a long time and listened, but even after five minutes there was absolute silence. Only then did he realize that he didn't even know where he was. He turned around. The darkness was perfect, he could not even see his hand before his eyes. Suddenly fear crept into him that he might be standing right in front of an abyss. Quickly he searched for his lighter. In the faint glow of the tiny flame he discovered a light switch right next to the hidden door.

He switched it on and a lamp hanging from the ceiling lighted up. He found himself standing on a short staircase leading down to a small room. The room was filled with shelves in which books and scrolls were stored, otherwise the grey concrete walls were bare. There were a few candlesticks in the room and in the middle there was a small wooden table and a chair. There was a book on the table.

All of this seemed to Bob like a mini library where Mr Whitehead kept books that no one else should see. Then the thought occurred to him that Whitehead might not even know anything about this room. He wondered if he should take a closer look around. But Jupe and Pete were first of all more important and this secret library would still be there for investigation.

He turned back to the secret door to attempt to at least open a gap to hear if the air was clear. But the door in front of him was perfectly smooth except for a small keyhole. There was no handle. He pressed against it, hoping that it might open in both directions, but nothing happened. Finally he pushed against the smooth door with all his might, but it didn't move a bit.

Now Bob knew that the door could only be opened inwards. He searched everywhere around the door again, looked for a mechanism of some sort, tried to claw into the door gap, but it was hopeless as nothing moved. And now he remembered the quiet click he had heard when closing the door.

It looked like he was trapped!

It was already dark, so now only the street lighting provided brightness at the back of the small van. Narrow strips of light fell through the windows and once glided over the faces of the three prisoners before they sat again in the darkness for a few seconds. The prisoners had tried to free themselves from their shackles, but then gave it up. The telephone cables were very tightly tied.

Jupiter, Pete and Mr Whitehead managed to rest comfortably against the inside wall of the van. All three then tried to talk to the two men in the front the van, but after they gave back some harsh answers, they didn't say anything anymore and the van continued on through the darkness unerringly.

It was so loud at the back of the van that the three could talk quietly to each other without their kidnappers noticing.

"We are now about fifty miles from Los Angeles," Jupiter whispered to his friend.

"How do you know?" Pete asked.

"The light," Jupiter explained. "The street lighting got brighter and brighter, we must have driven through the city."

“Now the lights are at a greater distance apart for close to an hour, and it has also become darker. We must be on a country road that goes out of Los Angeles.”

“And where are we going?” Pete continued.

“I wish I knew. We’ve probably been on the road for two hours now and I suspect that we’ve crossed almost all of Los Angeles. So we’re going either east or south. If at least the sun would still shine, then we could determine the direction by its position. But now... it’s impossible.”

“They want to go to a secluded place where they can assemble the burning sword undisturbed,” said Mr Whitehead next to them. “You were right, I should have destroyed the sword immediately. Now it’s too late and we’re in the clutches of this cult! My goodness!” He lowered his head in despair.

Pete and Jupiter rolled their eyes, which Mr Whitehead fortunately couldn’t see thanks to his head position.

Since they were trapped here, Mr Whitehead had repeatedly reproached himself and annoyed the two with his snivelling talk. No productive word had yet come out of his mouth. The two detectives were also afraid, but that was no reason for them to aggravate the situation.

“The eclipse is tomorrow around noon,” Pete whispered. “Are you saying we’ll be out all night?” Mr Whitehead didn’t know the answer to that either.

“It’s may be eleven o’clock now,” Pete surmised. “I’m beginning to think my parents are wondering where I am.”

“Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus too.” Jupiter lowered his voice to a flat whisper. “But at least Bob got away. He’ll let them know. Presumably, he had already informed Chief Reynolds and the Rocky Beach police are already looking for this van.”

“I hope so,” Pete added, but without much optimism.

They kept quiet for a while. Finally, the Second Investigator asked: “What happens to us when they assemble the sword tomorrow? I mean, what are they gonna do to us then?” Nobody answered, because nobody wanted to unsettle the others with gloomy suppositions.

“Bob will help us,” Jupiter said confidently. “I’m sure of it. After all, he’s not stupid.”

15. The Valley of Death

Bob looked at his watch. It was just before 11:00 pm. Exhausted, he sat down on the stairs and buried his face in both hands.

He had tried everything. He had searched the whole of the secret room for tools, anything he could use to open the door. But there was nothing but wood and paper. He thought of Pete and his black case of lock picks. He wasn't a lock expert like the Second Investigator, but after some tries he might have got the lock opened.

Bob then wondered where Jupe and Pete were right now. Still here in the house? Did they look for him? Or had the men kidnapped them? And what about Mr Whitehead?

He wondered whether he should just pound against the door and make a lot of noise so that someone could get to him. But if the two strangers were still there, nothing would be gained. Then he would be released from this prison, but he would be a prisoner again. If Jupe and Pete were still there, they would have called for him long ago. And if was nobody in the house, there would be no point making noise anyway, no one would hear it. So he rejected the idea.

"It doesn't work that way, Bob," he murmured to dispel the silence around him. "Jupe would act differently. He would weigh his options and then get the best out of the situation. And what's the best thing I can do now?" Determined, he stood up and walked over to the table.

If he didn't get out of there, he wanted at least to find out as much as possible about this room and look at the books and scrolls. Maybe that might help him somehow.

He sat down at the table and opened the book that was on it. In a large, broad manuscript there were a lot of names, addresses and dates that he could not relate to. The whole book was full of it. Bob then looked around at the books on the shelves. He grabbed one as the title caught his eye: 'The Covenant of the Sword'. The book was handwritten and in it was a detailed history of the cult, from the first leader in Ndalú to the disappearance of the burning sword in 1962. Many names and facts were mentioned, secret rituals were described and again and again the goals of the group were clearly presented: To bring Ndalú back under white rule and expand its power from there.

Bob's confusion grew. What were all these books and writings doing here? Were they another legacy from Billy Ford to Benjamin Whitehead that The Three Investigators knew nothing about? Did Mr Whitehead himself even know about this secret library? Or... Bob frowned. He was thinking of Ben, the mysterious butler. Did he perhaps have much more to do with this story than they all thought?

He skimmed over another book in which, in addition to countless religious rules and laws, the cult's history was followed up in America. After the death of their leader and the sword had disappeared without trace, the group was without a new leader and they wandered more or less aimlessly.

There had been a deputy leader, the so-called Keeper. The Keeper was the most important person in the hierarchy of the cult, after the leader. Bob remembered that Dr Wright had also spoken of this position. When the main members of the cult had come to America to seek the burning sword, the keeper named Earnest Blank had tried to seize power.

But the cult members who believed in the sword had rejected him as the leader, for according to their laws, only the one who possessed the sword could become the new leader. Blank then went underground, but he had taken his collection of old writings and documents with him. Without these guidelines, the Covenant was even more helpless, so for decades, hardly anything had been heard from it—apart from the incident with the man who had committed suicide for fear of prosecution—as Dr Wright had already told him earlier.

Bob was startled. The Keeper's collection had disappeared. He looked around the room and saw all the old books and records. "This has to be the Keeper's collection!" he said aloud to himself and his voice echoed coldly from the concrete walls. "I am in the refuge of the once most important man of the Covenant of the Sword!" He bit his lower lip.

Suddenly his mind was crystal clear. There were only three possibilities—either Mr Blank, the Keeper, was dead and this had been his house where he had hidden the collection of writings. But Bob thought this possibility was unlikely. Or Mr Blank was still alive and had changed his name. If so, then there were two prime suspects—either Whitehead or his butler Ben, who had used his work in this house to hide the books in a place where nobody suspected them.

"Of course, I could be wrong," Bob muttered. "But there's got to be some evidence around here somewhere!" He jumped up, took more books off the shelf and began to flick through them. He searched for names, for some clear indication to the present identity of the Keeper, who had disappeared without a trace at the time.

As he took a scroll from the shelf, something fell out of the rolled paper. Bob bent over and picked it up. It was an old passport. Some entry stamps from Africa were in it. Then he turned the page and saw the name of its owner: Earnest B. Blank.

Next to it was the photo. Bob saw the man in the picture and opened his eyes wide in horror!

"Will we ever get anywhere?" Pete asked. They were still driving through the night in the van. At some point they had turned north and Jupiter's infallible road map in his head had led him to conclude that they were driving into the Mojave Desert near San Bernadino. They've been on this road for quite some time. Meanwhile all their bones hurt and the Second Investigator wished for nothing more than to be able to move his arms forward. But even repeated requests had had no effect on the two men in front. In between he had dozed off once and had now completely lost the sense of time. "Do you have any idea what time it might be, Jupe?"

"Hard to say," he confessed. "It's pitch-black outside, anyway. Maybe one o'clock? Or two? I don't know. We still seem to be on the highway heading north-east, nothing has changed for a long time. It is just going straight and I can't hear any other vehicles passing. We must be in the middle of the desert now."

The van slowed down and turned left. Suddenly the road deteriorated. The previously pleasantly quiet ride was now very bumpy and the three involuntary passengers were shaken violently. In addition, the street lighting disappeared almost completely. Only every two hundred metres there was some light on the side of the road.

"What's going on now?" Mr Whitehead asked. He asked the question so loud that it was also directed at the two men in front. "Did we leave the road?"

"You'll find out soon enough," the blond man in the passenger seat answered harshly.

"When are we gonna get out of here?" Pete asked irritably. At first he still had some respect for their kidnappers, but slowly he got angry and his aching arms made his mood

even worse.

Surprisingly, the answer was a little milder this time: "We'll be there soon."

The journey continued through apparently impassable terrain and the 'soon' dragged on for at least another hour. At some point there was no light at all from outside, the van only ran with its own headlights.

Finally they stopped and the ride came to an end. The two men got out. Pete feared that they would simply leave them in the van, but shortly afterwards the double door at the back was opened, the blond man climbed in and rudely pulled the three prisoners to their feet. In the beginning they could hardly move, but after some stretching, the pain subsided quickly.

They were out in the open. It was unusually dark and millions of stars sparkled and shone. But the stars gave only a weak light and there was no moon in the sky. So it stayed pretty dark. Pete remembered that in a few hours the solar eclipse would take place, the moon would push itself in front of the sun. So there had to be a new moon.

"I've never seen such bright stars before," Pete said as he looked up. "And never before has there been such a pitch-black and wide sky."

"We're in the desert," Jupiter explained. "The next inhabited house should be miles away, so no light from Earth will disturb the darkness of the night." He shivered.

"Pretty cold," Jupiter continued. "It's typical here. During the day it is terribly hot in the Mojave Desert, but at night the temperatures drop quite low."

Pete looked around. But there was nothing to see. The darkness was so perfect that he could barely see the dark blue van just a few metres away. At his feet there was nothing but rubble, no plant to be seen. The Mojave Desert was for the most part a gravel desert, sand only existed in a few areas.

"Come with me," ordered the dark-haired man, pointing his fingers into the darkness before them.

"Where are we going?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"You'll see," the man replied curtly.

Then he looked at Jupiter frowning. "We've got some things to take with us. You can help us carry." Without another word, he gave the blond man a sign. He pulled out his knife and cut the cable on the three of them. Relieved, they rubbed their wrists, where the telephone cable had cut deeply. Then the blond man pressed a backpack into each of the three and pulled out his revolver. The dark-haired man took a flashlight and a bundle from the car and went ahead. The three prisoners followed him with their backpacks, behind them was the blond man who kept an eye on the three.

"How can you orientate yourself in this darkness?" Jupiter wanted to know, while he stared at the flashlight in front of him to see the unevenness of the ground. Instead of giving an answer, the man just pointed forward. Jupiter stared into the darkness and saw a small light at a distance. It could be a fire, but it was their target.

As they walked through the darkness in the middle of the barren wilderness, they reached some sort of a timber platform and they got onto it and continued walking. Soon, they passed a wooden sign at the centre of the platform, and it said: 'Badwater Basin—282 feet/85.5 meters below sea level'.

"Badwater Basin!" whispered Jupiter. "So my guess is correct after all."

"What guess?" Pete asked with a whisper.

"Where we are. Badwater Basin is a dry salt lake and is also the lowest point in the US. We're at 282 feet below sea level and in the middle of the Mojave Desert, more precisely in Death Valley."

“Death Valley!” Pete repeated and shivered, not knowing if it was because of the cold. “Sounds very inviting.”

“When the first gold prospectors came to California, some took the supposed shortcut through this valley—and many did not survive, as there is virtually no water here. They simply died of thirst. The survivors gave the valley its present name,” Jupiter explained.

“Thank you,” Pete said. “You could have saved yourself that history lesson.”

Bob looked at his watch. It was seven o’clock, the sun was just rising and under normal circumstances he would soon get up and be in school in an hour. Today the classes were to end at eleven o’clock, in order to give the students the chance to observe the solar eclipse. The school management had agreed that this rare event had more educational value than a normal school day. For Bob, however, there would be no classes at all today. He had slept a little on the floor, but apart from worrying about his friends and himself, hunger plagued him. That was another reason to get out of here as soon as possible.

Suddenly he heard a noise. It was the first sound from the outside since he’d been locked up there. He ran up the short stairs and pressed his ear on the secret door. There was someone in the study! Bob weighed the dangers for only a second, then pounded loudly on the door screaming.

“Help! Hello! Can anyone hear me?” Even if the two men had come back, he didn’t care now. He just wanted to get out of here. He was listening. Nothing moved.

But he had to be heard! Again Bob drummed against the wall and called and then suddenly he was pushed aside by the door moving. He backed away, and the door swung fully open.

The bright light that fell in from outside blinded him at first and he only saw the silhouette of a man standing at the entrance to the secret room. Then his eyes got used to the brightness. The shadow became a body and a face.

Bob called out in surprise: “Ben!”

16. The Truth Comes to Light

Jupiter's tongue felt like it had the whole Mojave Desert in his mouth. The sun had risen and burned mercifully down on them and as he had expected, it quickly became very hot. Every now and then one of their kidnappers came and brought them something to drink, but it was not enough to quench their thirst.

In the night they had reached a fire where other people—men and women—had already gathered. They wore the dark red robes Pete had seen before. In the course of the night and early morning, more and more members of the cult arrived. At that time, there had been a good three dozen of them. They arrived by car and walked the last bit.

Here, at the edge of the salt lake, they had built a kind of canopy under which Jupiter, Pete and Mr Whitehead now sat. They had been tied up again, water was brought to them, but otherwise they were ignored.

In the meantime, the two kidnappers had also put on red robes and were now no longer distinguishable from the rest. Newcomers were greeted by the group with strange ceremonial gestures.

Then they stepped under the canopy, where the three parts of the burning sword lay on the green cushion on the floor. The cult followers bowed to the objects and muttered soft prayers. Everything went very smoothly and that frightened the boys the most. There were no great theatrical ceremonies, no dances and rituals, and hardly anyone spoke to each other. They continued to ignore the three prisoners.

The First Investigator stared out at the desert. They were at the northern tip of Badwater Basin. In front of them was the lake, covered by salt, like a snow-covered surface. There was nothing else around. Death Valley was a flat plain strewn with rock and boulders. East and west of them, the mountains that lined the valley rose at a distance, but they swam in the flickering heat. In between there was only glowing emptiness and in the midst of this emptiness, religious fanatics waited for their great hour.

Jupiter thought of Bob. Slowly he had given up hope that help would come from him. How could he or the police find this obscure place in the middle of nowhere? He was even more concerned with the question of what would happen to them if the burning sword was assembled. He was thinking about escaping. But apart from the fact that they were tied up—where would they flee to?

“Now tell me what's going on,” Bob demanded angrily, staring at Ben, who was sitting next to him in the driver's seat of his Jeep, concentrating on the traffic. They drove towards Los Angeles and Bob still had no idea why the butler stepped on the accelerator, where they were going and what it all meant.

After Ben had freed him from the secret room, he had told the butler what had happened. Ben just told Bob to plunder the fridge, bring as many drinks as possible into Ben's car and get in. Ben had left without giving a single explanation. “Later,” he had said, “when we're on our way. We have no time to lose.”

“Where are we going anyway?” Bob asked when Ben was still not talking.

“Into the desert. To be precise, Death Valley.”

“What? To Death Valley?” Bob, who knew geography a little better than Pete, knew something about the place. “What are we going to do there?”

“To prevent misfortune,” Ben replied.

“Shouldn’t we better call the police...” Bob started, but the butler shook his head vigorously.

“Better not,” answered Ben.

“Then tell me what’s going on here,” Bob demanded. “What’s happened? Where are Jupiter, Pete and Mr Whitehead? And what do you have to do with this?”

Instead of answering, Ben reached into the glove compartment and pulled out something white. It wasn’t until he held it to his chin that Bob realized that it was a false beard that was now sticking slightly around Ben’s mouth. Then the butler grabbed his head and pulled down his pitch-black hair. Under the wig he was bald, only a white wreath of hair remained. Within seconds, the butler had become a different person.

Bob stared at him with surprise and widened his eyes.

“Dr Wright!” he exclaimed. “You’re Dr Wright!”

The man who suddenly looked much older nodded. “Right.”

“What... why...” Bob stammered and didn’t know which question to ask first.

“I’ll tell you,” said the man as he drove east through northern Los Angeles. “My name is Ken Wright. I teach at the university, as you know. We’ve had the pleasure of talking before.”

“Yes, but...”

The man silenced him with a gesture of his hand and continued: “For decades I have been interested in the Covenant of the Sword. It began as a simple interest, but the more I found out about this cult, the more I realized the danger it posed. To learn more about it, I entered the cult many years ago under a false name. But I was exposed and cast out, then persecuted. So I faked a suicide to be safe from the cult. I was the man who, at the end of the sixties, had become an alleged victim of the cult. After that, I proceeded more cautiously. I researched and researched and made connections with former cult members who had left. One day I discovered that the Keeper, the deputy leader, who had been expelled by the Covenant, still lived here in the area. The Keeper, Earnest Blank, is none other than...”

“Benjamin Whitehead,” Bob interrupted him. “I know. I found his old passport in the secret room and recognized his photo.”

“Exactly. Benjamin Whitehead. Under this name he started a new life and I managed to become his butler under a false name and in a disguise. After a long time, I discovered his secret library and could continue my research there when Whitehead was not in the house. And slowly one thing became clearer and clearer to me—he had by no means renounced the cult, but was just waiting to seize power at the right moment.”

“But he needed the burning sword for that,” Bob said.

“That’s right. And that was owned by Billy Ford, an old friend of Whitehead’s. While in Africa, Billy Ford had already renounced from the Covenant and believed that Whitehead had also left the cult, so he bequeathed the sword to him after his death. He assumed that Whitehead would carry out what he had set out to do—to destroy the sword at the next solar eclipse.”

“And Whitehead never intended to do that?” Bob asked in astonishment.

“Yes,” explained Dr Wright. “Whitehead only waited for the eclipse to come to assemble the sword and become the new leader of the cult. But until then he wanted to hide, after all he had been rejected before and would probably not be accepted back by his old comrades.”

“But then the cult found out where the sword was and took us by surprise last night,” Bob said. “But they should have recognized Whitehead!”

Dr Wright shook his head. “Probably not. After all, many years have passed and many of today’s followers were not even there when Whitehead alias Blank was the Keeper.”

“But then would Whitehead reveal his true identity before the eclipse?” Bob asked.

“He would, when the time is right.”

“We believed all that Whitehead told us, but he actually lied to us from the beginning,” Bob said, stunned. “His story about Billy Ford being an old acquaintance, who one day told him about the cult, was made up. Whitehead himself was a follower and knew Billy Ford from that time. He could even make Ford believe he got out of the cult.”

“Don’t blame yourself for that,” said Dr Wright. “Whitehead is a very good actor, he’s been fooling everyone for years.”

“And why are we going to the desert now?”

“All the cult followers will meet there to await the eclipse and assemble the sword. It took me a long time to find out through various sources of information and intermediaries where they would celebrate the day of unification. The Covenant of the Sword is about bringing together the power of day and night. They chose the desert because in their opinion, the power of the sun is greatest there.

“Furthermore, the core shadow of the moon during this solar eclipse lies directly above Death Valley. So the eclipse of the sun by the moon is most perfect at this place.”

“Do you think Jupiter and Pete will be there too?” Bob asked.

“That’s what I’m expecting. They’ll have taken them there to avoid anyone else getting in their way.”

“And what will happen to them?” Bob asked anxiously.

Ken Wright shrugged. “At first they will do nothing to them, for ultimately they are subject to the strict laws of their religion, which forbid them to inflict suffering on another person in the name of the sword before the sword is reunited and there is a new leader. After that, it’ll be the new leader’s decision. He’ll decide what happens to your friends.”

“Will this Stan be the new leader?” Bob asked.

“Yes. At least if Whitehead doesn’t get in his way. Or someone else. But Stan is currently the most respected member of the cult.”

Bob had to digest all this new information first. Everyone in this mess had had a covert identity. First it was Billy Ford, who had lived under his real name, William Benson, in Africa and had stolen the sword there. Then there was Earnest Blank, the Keeper of the cult, who changed his name to Benjamin Whitehead and went into hiding only to reappear at the right moment. And finally, Dr Wright, who had crept into Whitehead’s house as Butler Ben to track down the sword.

“I think I owe you an apology,” Bob finally said. “My friends and I suspected you of being connected to the cult.”

Dr Wright laughed. “You weren’t quite wrong about that. Only you have suspected me on the wrong side.”

“Were you the one who gave us the anonymous tip on where the stone was?”

“Right, that was me. And in retrospect, I’m sorry,” Dr Wright said. “When you reported to Mr Whitehead that the stone had been stolen, I knew who could have stolen it and where it was probably hidden then. Of course I was very keen to get the stone back, because it was more dangerous for it to be in the hands of the cult than it was in the hands of Whitehead—at least that was so at that time. So I called you, after all, you offered your services to retrieve

the stone back. I realized too late that I might have put you in great danger, and I was very relieved when everything went well.

“Two days later, when you showed up in my office at the university and luckily you didn’t recognize me, I decided to open up and tell you the whole story about the Covenant. I thought that would scare you so much that you’d stay out of it. I didn’t want to put you in danger again. That’s why I told you about the suicide which I faked.”

“We almost stayed out of it,” Bob replied, “and just wanted to warn Mr Whitehead once more. After all, we couldn’t know that he already knew better than all of us did. Well, I guess that was our mistake.”

Bob sighed. “If we hadn’t shown up at Whitehead’s yesterday, none of this would have happened.” He kept quiet for a while and then added quietly: “I hope Jupe and Pete are all right.”

They drove further east, leaving the city behind them. The area became drier and warmer. Now Bob knew why Dr Wright had insisted on taking as many drinks as possible with him. In the desert it could be very dangerous if you didn’t drink enough. Bob quickly took a sip from a water bottle.

Three hours later they were already driving on a highway through the middle of the Mojave Desert. Dusty roads and endless landscapes of mountains, rocks, stones and sand dominate the area. Here and there a cactus or a dried shrub stood at the roadside, but that was the only vegetation. Everything flickered in the hot air. Bob looked through the car window into the bright blue sky.

“There!” he shouted and pointed to the sun. A small corner of the sun was missing. The moon had begun to move over the day star. “How long will it be before the sun completely darkens?” Bob asked worriedly. Shortly before, he had seen a road sign indicating the distance to Death Valley. It would take them some time to reach the valley, although Dr Wright drove very fast.

“About an hour and a half,” he replied. “The total eclipse lasts for about four minutes, then the sun slowly shifts out of the shadow of the moon again. It’s going to be close.”

17. When Day and Night Unite

The sun now looked like a glowing crescent moon. Two thirds of it were covered by the moon and slowly this became very noticeable. It got a bit cooler and darker and wind came up blowing fine dust over the rubble desert. Jupiter estimated that the moon would have moved completely in front of the sun in about half an hour.

The cult followers stood motionless in a circle next to the canopy. They did not speak, but only looked up to the ever-diminishing solar disk. Some moved their lips silently. All wore the same red robe, only one of them had golden seams.

Pete recognized Stan. He should probably become the new leader of the cult. Jupiter, Mr Whitehead, and he were still sitting tied up under the fabric roof, but now no one came to give them water.

"Jupiter, Pete," Whitehead said. "You have to help me up."

"What are you up to?" Pete asked.

"I have a plan," Whitehead replied.

"You better not get in their way," advised the First Investigator. "Who knows what they are capable of when they are disturbed in their religious ecstasy. So far they've ignored us, but I'm fine with that."

Whitehead did not respond. "Help me... please!" He tried to lift himself up alone, but failed because of his tied hands.

"What are you doing?" Pete repeated his question.

"You'll see."

Pete looked at Juve and shrugged his shoulders. The First Investigator nodded approvingly. They pushed against Mr Whitehead so that he could lean on the backs of the two boys and stand up. Finally he stood up firm and walked slowly towards the large group.

Meanwhile there were over fifty people in red robes standing in a circle, Mr Whitehead stepped up to them and suddenly shouted, "*When day and night unite, the burning sword will be on fire! And the fire of power is the weapon of the Covenant!*"

The red robes turned to him in astonishment. There was great confusion, but no one said anything.

Whitehead kept moving towards the group and eventually stepped into the middle of the circle. "I am your Keeper!" he cried.

Then Stan, the man in the red and gold robe, broke out of the circle and stepped up to him. His hands approached Whitehead's throat and Jupiter feared he'd want to strangle him, but instead Stan grabbed Whitehead's shirt sleeves and ripped open his shirt to reveal the tied man's chest. Even from this distance Jupiter and Pete could clearly see the sign of the Covenant—a sword tattooed onto his skin.

The First Investigator whirled around to his friend. "He tricked us!" he shouted. "He... he is..."

"The Keeper!" cried the men and women in the circle.

"He is indeed the Keeper!" Immediately they took off his shackles and surrounded him.

"Yes, I am the Keeper," Whitehead said, smiling. "And I will be your new rightful leader in the name of the sword!"

Stan stepped in between, angrily. "I am the new leader! You were cast out of the Covenant years ago!"

Whitehead put his hand on the shoulder of his opponent, calming him down. "I was cast out because I wanted to be a good leader of the Covenant without having the sword. But now the sword is back and I have learned over the years. I am still the Keeper of the Holy Scriptures—they are still in my possession. By the law of the sword, I am the rightful leader."

"You've been gone too long," Stan disagreed. "You don't know what happened all this while."

"I know enough." Whitehead turned his face to the sky. Only a quarter of the sun was visible now. "We don't have much time left. Let the others decide who they want as their new leader, in the name of the sword."

Jupiter tugged at his shackles. Not because he thought he could free himself, but because he was raging. His face was distorted and he bit his teeth together. "How could we be so stupid?" he hissed. "He set us up, from the beginning! And we idiots also gave him the stone!"

Pete was also speechless. He saw Whitehead there in the crowd of cult followers. He seemed to have become a completely different man. The friendly, conscientious and somewhat superstitious businessman had become a haughty leader who smiled benevolently at his disciples. They should now decide whether Stan or he became their new leader. "It's unbelievable," whispered the Second Investigator. "And he waited until the last moment."

"Yes," Jupiter grumbled. "It was a smart move. The followers do not have much time to discuss..." He stopped abruptly and stared wide-eyed at Pete.

"What is it?" Pete asked worriedly. Then, almost in panic: "What's wrong?"

"I'm free!" Jupiter whispered half surprised, half pleased. "I was so angry I pulled the phone cable that the knot just came loose!"

"Go faster," Bob urged, worriedly watching the sky. "Otherwise we won't make it, the sun is already just a narrow crescent!"

"If I go any faster, the car under the seats will break apart." Dr Wright was anxiously watching the speedometer reading.

The Jeep just raced into a deep pothole again and shook the two occupants violently. They were now driving through the middle of Death Valley. Some signs, which stood at the boulder-covered way, showed them the direction to Badwater Basin. There were only three miles to go.

"I think I can see it now," Bob shouted and pointed forward. A very bright surface glittered on the horizon. "That must be the salt lake. We must reach there in time!"

Then he suddenly became very quiet. "What do we do when we get there?" he asked. "I mean, do you have any plan on how we can stop these crazies from putting the sword together?"

Dr Wright did not answer.

Jupiter and Pete stared at the sky anxiously. It was now quite dark and cool and only a tiny strip of the sun was visible. Jupiter had freed Pete from his shackles, but they continued to sit on the floor and held their hands behind their backs so as not to attract attention. They had decided to wait until total darkness and then run to one of the cars in the area. The cult would be busy elsewhere and would not bother about them for the time being. At least, that's what they hoped.

Two men just went to take the parts of the sword and carried them to the circle. In the middle of the circle was still Whitehead.

Now he wore the red and gold robe. The vote was clearly in his favour. Either Stan was not very popular or the laws of the cult had not allowed any other decision. In retrospect, the reasons for their choice were probably irrelevant. Stan had accepted his fate and put on a normal robe and was now also in the circle.

The two men laid the pillow at Whitehead's feet on the stony ground and Whitehead knelt in front of it.

Everyone was looking up. The moon had left only a tiny spot of light from the sun and a few seconds later it disappeared. There was breathless silence. For a few moments it was dark, then the corona of the sun shone like a flaming wreath dancing around the black disk of the moon in red and yellow light.

Whitehead had four minutes to assemble the sword and perform the ritual. He immediately took the handle of the sword in one hand, the red stone in the other. He inserted the stone into the handle. Then he took the blade and assembled it to the handle and the stone. Then he shouted out loud: "*When day and night unite, the burning sword will be on fire! And the fire of power is the weapon of the Covenant!*" He stood up and held the sword with both hands, then he thrust it victoriously into the air and towards the darkened sun.

But nothing happened. The blade remained dark. The burning sword did not burn.

Jupiter pulled himself out of his numbness and whispered to Pete: "Let's get out of here!" He stood up and wanted to run away when suddenly two bright lights flashed at him. A car approached them at a tremendous speed. The First Investigator retreated. "What... who is that?" he cried.

The circle of the cult had begun to move. The sword did not burn and all faces—including Mr Whitehead's—were filled with great confusion and dismay. Then they noticed the car that was speeding towards them through the suddenly dark desert. It slowed down just before the circle of the cult and a bald man with a white wreath of hair got out from the driver's side. And on the other side was...

"Bob!" cried Jupiter.

"Hold them back!" Whitehead shouted. "They are here to disturb the ritual! Seize them!"

Some of the cult members set themselves in motion to carry out the order, but most remained undecided. Juve and Pete ran over to Bob.

The newcomer confronted the cult members. "Stop!" he shouted. "He doesn't carry the burning sword, he can't give you orders!" The men and women stopped, now completely confused. Jupiter and Pete were also confused, but they were torn back and forth by their joy of seeing Bob and the events happening right next to them.

The man continued: "That sword has got the wrong stone! I've got the right one!" He confidently approached the circle and Whitehead. None of the followers held him back.

When they faced each other, Whitehead recognized the man despite his changed appearance. "Ben!" he whispered.

"Give me the sword," Ben said and stretched out his hand demanding.

"But you are not part of the Covenant!" Whitehead cried.

"Yes, I am!" Ben replied curtly and opened his shirt. Also on his chest was the sword tattoo. He looked up at the sun, which was still covered by the moon, with only its corona shining. Whether he knew it or not, he had only about a minute and a half before the eclipse is over.

Then he shouted loud, so that all could hear it: "And I will be your new leader, for only in my hand will the sword be on fire!"

He snatched the sword from Whitehead, dismantled it, then reached into his pocket and pulled out another stone. Very swiftly, he inserted it, reassembled the sword. He then shouted the same sacred chant of the Covenant, and held the sword up with both hands towards the sun as Whitehead had done earlier.

The weak light of the eclipsed sun was reflected in the small red stone and the stone glowed as if it shone from within. The glow continued over the glass blade and it looked as if a thousand small flames were dancing on it.

The burning sword was on fire!

18. The Beautiful Things in Life

The Three Investigators were sitting in their headquarters waiting. Everyone had something in their hands and played with it nervously. And everyone wondered if he would come. They had not yet let go of the events of two days ago and again and again they talked about their experiences.

Dr Wright alias Ben had actually been recognized by the Covenant of the Sword as the new leader. That he had suddenly stepped into the circle and demanded the sword, had surprised not only Whitehead and the cult, but above all, The Three Investigators. Were they on somebody's leash again? Was everything all over?

After the general unrest had finally subsided, Dr Wright had made sure the three were well treated and then brought home. The cult members had gradually disappeared and Whitehead had avoided Dr Wright and the rest of the members.

Dr Wright had promised The Three Investigators to contact them as soon as he could and explain everything to them. The following day he had called them and arranged to meet them today.

When The Three Investigators arrived home, they were received by concerned parents and guardians who had been almost scared to death. After all, they had been gone all night and the next day. Lys, Elizabeth and Kelly had also been very worried and even Chief Reynolds had been called in. The Three Investigators had to tell their story in detail many times, before their minds had calmed down halfway.

But nobody was really calm yet, because nobody knew exactly what the consequences of the events at Death Valley would be. They had hoped that Dr Wright would give them the answers.

Finally there was a knock on the door. Jupiter opened and Dr Wright entered and greeted the three. He looked again like the university lecturer that Bob met earlier, only without the beard. There was nothing left of the butler Ben on the outside. He sat down with them and began to talk:

"I think I have some things to explain to you. Bob knows most of it already and has probably told you my story in detail. What I didn't tell him was that I had replaced the stone with a fake. After you brought the stone back to Mr Whitehead, I exchanged it with an imitation that I had made a long time ago for such situations. I had suspected that things could go wrong, and so wanted to keep the real stone for safety. The imitation was by no means so elaborately crafted, so the sword lacked the characteristic fire when Whitehead put it together. We arrived just in time for the eclipse so that I could change the stone to make myself the leader of the Covenant."

Jupiter looked at him seriously. "Was that part of the plan from the start?" he asked.

Wright nodded. "I must confess, yes—that was the original plan. Only I had imagined everything a little easier. However as many things changed along the way, I had to come up with several contingency plans in case I did not achieve my original plan. Finally, the imitation stone plan was the one I used. Had I not been successful to become the new leader, I also would have prevented Whitehead or Stan from taking that position."

“And what are you going to do now with your new-found power?” The First Investigator could not prevent the sarcastic tone in his voice.

Wright smiled. “I certainly don’t want to harm anyone, if that’s what you mean. I have spent more than half of my life working with the Covenant of the Sword, and was even a cult member myself once. I also have the tattoo from that time—and I know exactly how dangerous this cult could be if it is led by a fanatic. It had been so harmless in recent years only because no one had been at its helm and its laws forbid the members to do anything without the power of the burning sword. So one thing was clear to me—if the sword ever appeared again and a solar eclipse was imminent, there was only one way to prevent the worst that could happen. To make sure that no crazy extremist leads the cult and use it to build his own power, I had to become the leader myself. It was the only way to destroy the cult.”

“But it still exists,” Bob disagreed. “It has by no means been rendered harmless.”

Dr Wright nodded. “That’s right. But their faith forces cult followers to be absolutely obedient to their leader. So now I’m the only person who can command them. And little by little I will free them from their extremist ideologies and show them a better way—a path of freedom and tolerance that leads them to let other people live how and where they want. And that one day they will learn to go their own way instead of listening to a leader or a sword that is nothing more than a piece of glass. I have the power to bring the idea of freedom and tolerance to these people because they will listen to me. One day they will be able to renounce their hostile faith without a guilty conscience, and then the Covenant of the Sword will no longer exist.”

“That sounds good,” Jupiter admitted, feeling a little uncomfortable that he had a few moments earlier felt uncertain of Dr Wright’s intentions. “Do you think you’ll succeed?”

“It’s a long way, of course,” Wright admitted. “But I believe that with enough stamina, I will be able to change the beliefs of this dangerous cult.”

“But what about Stan and Whitehead?” Pete asked. “At least you have taken from them what they have presumably been striving to get for years. Will they not try to take revenge on you?”

Wright shook his head. “I don’t think so. At least Stan is a strict believer, so he will comply with my will, just like everyone else. Whitehead may try to betray me, but no one will join him. Rather, they will repudiate him as soon as he tries to question my position.”

They talked for a long time about the cult and its internal structures, about the problem of abuse of power and about the future. Finally, Dr Wright alias Ben said goodbye and promised to contact them from time to time to tell them how far he had come with his work in the cult. The Three Investigators accompanied him outside. Dr Wright got in his battered Jeep, waved once and drove away.

They watched him go, and when the car had disappeared around the corner of the street, they turned their heads almost simultaneously and blinked thoughtfully into the bright sun. No little cloud stood in the sky and for a long time the moon would not be able to darken the sun any more.

Jupiter sighed. “We were pretty naïve,” he said. “And we’ve been very lucky.”

“Why were we naïve?” Pete asked. “We really could never have known that Whitehead was our opponent. Even your super brain would never have thought of it.”

The First Investigator shook his head. “I don’t mean that. We were stupid, because we always thought that we could cope with all difficulties. But we were wrong. This story could’ve turned out pretty bad. And not just for us.”

“You’re right,” Bob agreed with him. “We should always remember that we are not infallible.”

“Jupe, Pete, Bob!” someone shouted from behind. They turned around and saw Aunt Mathilda waving to them from the house. “Come on over, there’s cherry pie!”

Pete smiled. “Fortunately, there are still such beautiful things in life.”

Slowly and thoughtfully they went over to the house.